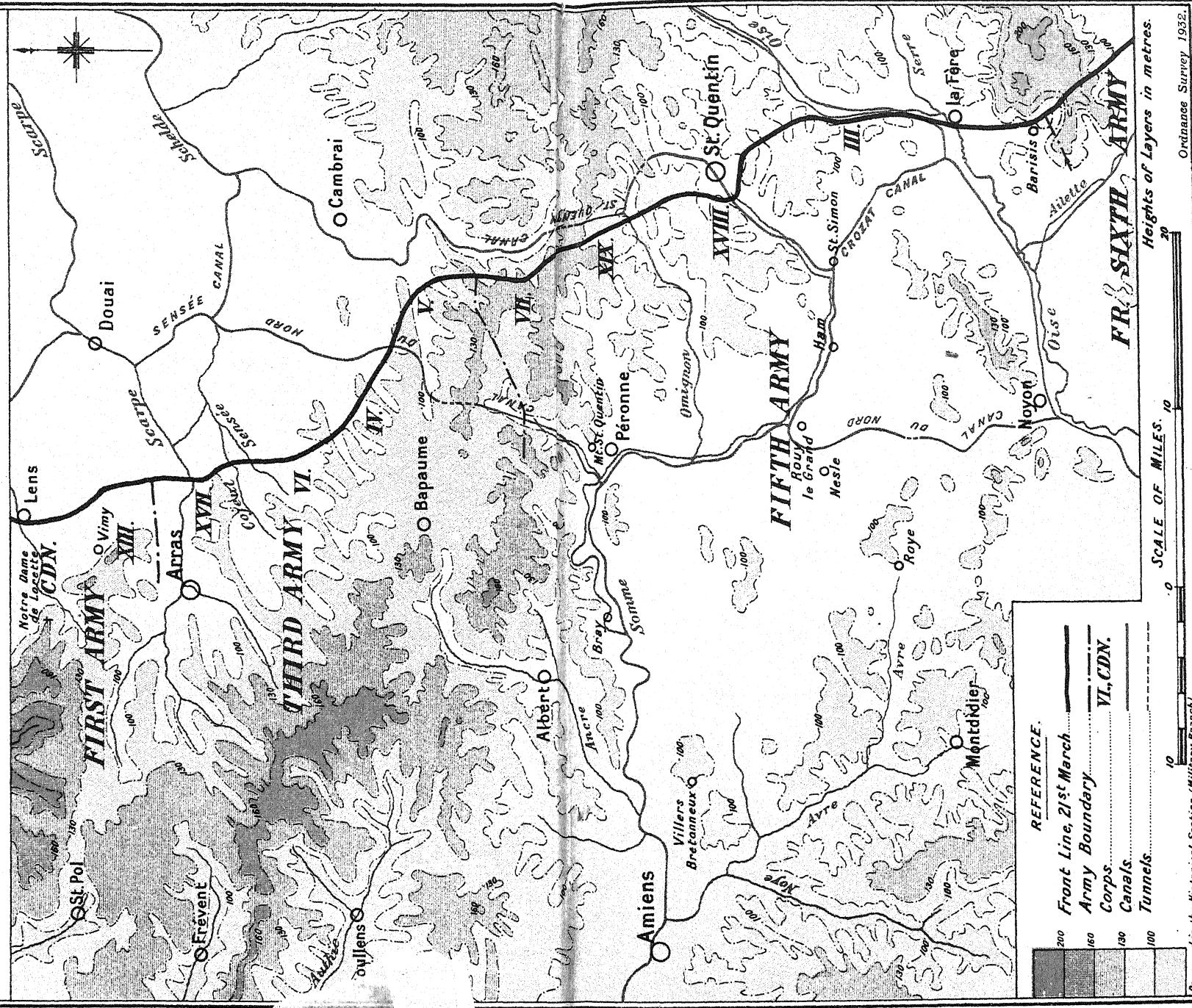




# THE BATTLE AREA, MARCH 1918.

Sketch A.



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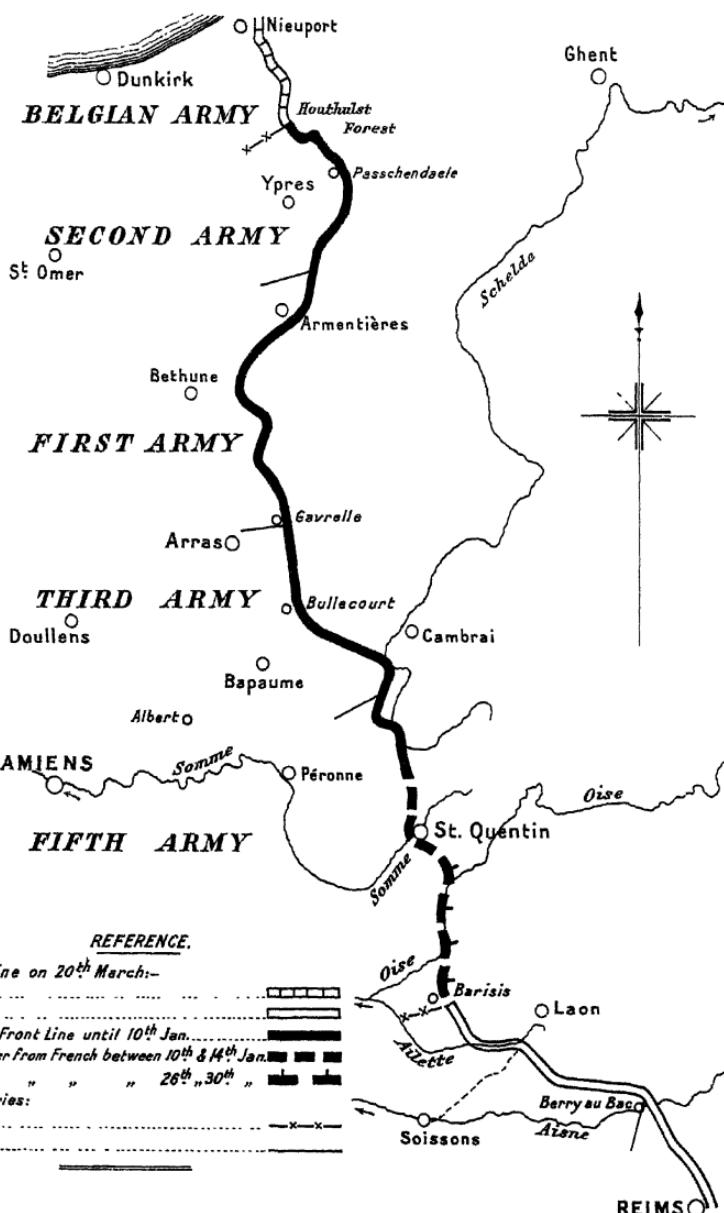
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*Sketch 1.*

## EXTENSION OF THE BRITISH FRONT.



HISTORY OF THE GREAT WAR

BASED ON OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS

BY DIRECTION OF THE HISTORICAL SECTION OF THE  
COMMITTEE OF IMPERIAL DEFENCE

# MILITARY OPERATIONS

## FRANCE AND BELGIUM, 1918

THE GERMAN MARCH OFFENSIVE AND ITS PRELIMINARIES

COMPILED BY

BRIGADIER-GENERAL SIR JAMES E. EDMONDS

C.B., C.M.G., R.E. (Retired), p.s.c.

MAPS AND SKETCHES COMPILED BY

MAJOR A. F. BECKE

R.A. (Retired), Hon. M.A. (Oxon.)

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1935

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There took part in the compilation of the  
first draft of this Volume :

Major-General H. R. Davies, C.B.

Lieut.-Colonel R. G. B. Maxwell-Hyslop, *p.s.c.*

and of the maps

Major F. W. Tomlinson

## PREFACE

THIS volume gives an account of the great German offensive begun on the 21st March 1918, with its preliminaries on both sides, up to and inclusive of the 26th March. On that date, at the Doullens Conference, General Foch, Chief of the General Staff of the French Army, was charged with the co-ordination of the action of the Allied Armies on the Western Front.

The appearance of a volume on 1918 before the history of 1916 has been completed, or any portion of that of 1917 published, requires a word of explanation. For some little time, in order to accelerate the production of the history of the Western Front, the preliminary work on 1916 and on 1918 has been carried on simultaneously. Latterly the pace has been slow, owing to the reduction of the staff for reasons of economy ; but on the completion of the revised edition of "1914" Vol. I., the drafts and maps for the 1918 period were in a more advanced state than those for the second part of 1916. The story of the March offensive being of peculiar interest, it was decided to finish the 1918 volume forthwith.

Chapters I.-VII., preliminary to the actual fighting, contain an account of the failure of the Government, in spite of warnings, to be prepared for the defection of Russia ; the discussion of the Allied plans for 1918 ; the French demands for the extension of the British front in order, as is now admitted, to collect a large French reserve of 40 divisions ; the situation in Italy after Caporetto ; the creation of the Versailles Supreme War Council, with its subsidiary Committee of Permanent Military Representatives, Executive War Board, and Committee of General Officers ; the supersession of Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff ; the attempts to organize a General Reserve ; the failure to provide reinforcements for the British Armies in France, the sudden reduction of the

number of infantry battalions in the British divisions from twelve to nine, the shortage of labour for the construction of defences, the preparations to meet the imminent German offensive ; and the enemy plans and orders for that offensive.

About all these matters there is abundant material. As regards the fighting it is otherwise ; the war diaries are as a rule meagre, particularly so after the first two days : in some cases the officers who sign the diaries admit that they were not present during the battle and wrote up the record days afterwards on statements of such survivors as were available. In other cases, nothing has been set down—one artillery brigade diary has a bracket over 21st–28th March, with only the words “in action” entered against it. The first draft of the narrative, pieced together as best it could be from orders, messages, reports and diaries, was therefore circulated to a very large number of officers, over fifteen hundred. Of these more than half furnished very valuable corrections, additions and suggestions, for which I tender my most sincere thanks. Thus although no single officer was able to see very much—one of them said that “to write “about March 1918 is like writing about a cathedral from “the knowledge of one window only”—a fairly good picture of what happened has been obtained. The best test of its accuracy is that nearly all the various fragments of information provided by so many hands fitted into their places to form the picture like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle ; the few discrepancies were usually as regards time and the exact sequence of correlated movements.

The battle of the 21st March took place on a 50-mile front, which lengthened on the following days ; over sixty British and German divisions were at first engaged, and this number also increased and French troops came on the scene. The difficulty has been to compress the narrative into a reasonable space. It would have been impossible, without running into more pages than anyone would care to read, to describe all the movements ; but it has been sought to make clear why positions were lost, and how the troops in their retirements got from one position to another. For the same reason it has been impossible to mention every unit engaged.<sup>1</sup> Although the artillery, engineers, pioneers, trench mortar companies and machine-gun battalions, co-operated, the infantry and cavalry receive the greatest share of notice, because the front depended on whether

<sup>1</sup> The morning position of the units of cavalry, infantry, engineers and pioneers, will, however, be found on the maps.

the infantry and cavalry acting dismounted, stood or retired. Special reference, however, is made to the action of tank units and the Royal Flying Corps. But wherever infantry fought, there were always some machine gunners with them ; when tanks became disabled, their crews joined the nearest infantry with their Lewis guns ; and the men of the trench mortar units, there being no transport provided for their weapons, also fought as infantry.

Luck was with the Germans at the opening of the battle. The fog lay thickest and lasted longest on that part of the British line which, having recently been taken over from the French, had the weakest defences and for strategic reasons was most thinly held. It must be freely admitted that the British Armies of 1918, after two and a half years of offensive warfare, were not well trained to stand on the defensive and to deal with an attack by infiltration ; they were totally untrained in the carrying out of a retreat. But in a few days of active warfare they quickly learnt the tricks of the trade, and were fighting better at the close of the sixth day than they had been on the second. The splendid young manhood which filled the ranks was never beaten, never demoralized by retreat, and it may be left to the imagination how it would have fought had it been fully trained. Unfortunately the British had such a long line to hold that it was impossible to pull out even a small proportion of the divisions for even a fortnight's training. As a further handicap, the first weeks of 1918 were nearly wholly taken up with carrying out the reorganization necessitated by the reduction of the number of infantry battalions in a division from twelve to nine. Sir Douglas Haig was moved to say that the unfortunate troops and their commander were at the mercy of an "Organizer of Defeat". Our opponents on the other hand had spent the whole winter training staffs and divisions for their great, and, as they hoped, final effort.

For the retirement of the Fifth Army, which was no more defeated than was the original B.E.F. in its retreat to the Seine in 1914, the Government chose to regard General Sir Hubert Gough as responsible and, despite the strongest protests of the Commander-in-Chief, they removed him from command. The Army, and particularly his own Army, felt and still feel that as regards events in 1918 he was unfairly treated. This statement is made only after discussion with hundreds of officers, amongst whom there was no dissentient. An enquiry was refused to General

Gough, but at the same time he was informed in a letter from the War Office, signed by the Military Secretary but actually drafted by Lord Milner's own hand : " In harmony " with the opinion of his advisers, the Secretary of State " does not feel that you are in any way disqualified for a " command appropriate to your rank and service, and your " name will, if you so desire it, be considered as opportunities " occur. The gallant fight of the Fifth Army against such " heavy odds<sup>1</sup> and in circumstances of extraordinary " difficulty, will always rank as one of the most noteworthy " episodes in the Great War ".

Those who read this narrative will without doubt agree with Lord Milner's words.

For the air operations I had the use of the typescript of Volume IV. (since published) of the Official History, " The War in the Air ", and I have to thank Mr. H. A. Jones, M.C., its author, for bringing to my notice the air reports which established that the fog on the 21st March was denser and lasted longer on the front of the Fifth Army than on that of the Third.

The Service Historique de l'État-Major de l'Armée, under General Azan, kindly furnished an advance type-written account, with maps, of the French operations. As, however, the compilation of the present volume has taken some years, and before it was sent to press the French official account, Tome VI., Volume I., dealing with the early part of 1918, was published, I was able to make use of the completed French version.

The German official account has not reached 1918, but the *Reichsarchiv* was good enough to supply much information and to mark on the maps issued with the present volume the places of the German divisions. It must be recorded with regret that Major-General H. von Haefften, the President of the *Reichsarchiv*, had to retire at the end of April 1934 on account of ill-health.

Much important information as to the German plans and operations was found in General von Kuhl's " Entstehung, " Durchführung und Zusammenbruch der Offensive von " 1918 ", based on official documents ;<sup>2</sup> in General Schwarze's " Der grosse Krieg. Der Landkrieg ", Vol. III. ;

<sup>1</sup> Five to one, whilst German history shows that 2½ to 1 is usually sufficient to obtain complete victory over a foe equal in valour and training.

<sup>2</sup> General von Kuhl, besides being Crown Prince Rupprecht's Chief of the Staff, was one of the technical assistants of the *Reichstag* Commission which enquired into the loss of the War.

and in "Der Tag. Der grosse Schlacht in Frankreich", by Captain G. Goes, an *Archivrat* in the *Reichsarchiv*, which goes into details of the fighting. The numerous German regimental histories not only provided useful clues or confirmations, but filled in a number of gaps and helped to explain why certain events happened.

A few Notes are appended to the chapters, and abbreviated orders of battle will be found at the end of the book; but the Appendices, as some of the documents selected are lengthy, have been put into a separate volume. It has already been announced in the Preface of "1916" Volume I. that, following the example of the French official account, separate order of battle volumes are being prepared.

The names of the officers who took part in the most laborious work of compiling the first draft are printed opposite the first page of this Preface, but I have also received very great assistance from the staff of the Historical Section (Military Branch): from Mr. E. A. Dixon and Mr. A. W. Tarsey as regards clearing up points raised by correspondents and from Captain W. Miles in revision and preparation for the press. I have again had the benefit of invaluable criticism of the final draft from my brother-in-law, Mr. W. B. Wood, M.A. and from Lieut.-Colonel H. G. de Watteville, C.B.E., late R.A., *p.s.c.*

All officers interested may not have seen the draft or proofs. I beg, therefore, as I have done in previous volumes, that any corrections or additions, and criticisms, thought necessary may be sent to the Secretary of the Historical Section, Committee of Imperial Defence, 2 Whitehall Gardens, S.W.1. At the same time, I offer my thanks to those who so kindly furnished corrections for the earlier volumes. A sheet of "Addenda and Corrigenda" is enclosed in this volume.

J. E. E.

*July 1934.*



## NOTES

THE location of troops and places is written from right to left of the front of the Allied Forces, unless otherwise stated. In translations from the German the order given is as in the original ; otherwise enemy troops are enumerated like the British. Where roads which run through both the British and German lines are described by the names of towns or villages, the place in British hands is mentioned first, thus : "Albert—Bapaume road".<sup>1</sup>

To save space and bring the nomenclature in line with "Division", "Infantry Brigade" has in the text been abbreviated to "Brigade", as distinguished from "Cavalry Brigade" and "Artillery Brigade"; and "Regiment" similarly means "Infantry Regiment".

The convention observed in the British Expeditionary Force is followed as regards the distinguishing numbers of Armies, Corps, Divisions, etc., of the British and Allied Armies, e.g. they are written in full for Armies, in Roman figures for corps, and in Arabic for smaller formations and units, except Artillery Brigades, which are Roman; thus : Fourth Army, IV. Corps, 4th Cavalry Division, 4th Division, 4th Cavalry Brigade, 4th Brigade, IV. Brigade R.F.A.

German formation and units, to distinguish them clearly from the Allies, are printed in italic characters, thus : *First Army, I. Corps, 1st Division*.

The usual Army abbreviations of regimental names have been used : for example, "2/R. West Kent" or "West Kent" for 2nd Battalion The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment; K.O.Y.L.I. for the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry; K.R.R.C. for the King's Royal Rifle Corps. To avoid constant repetition, the "Royal" in regimental titles is sometimes omitted. To economise space the 63rd (Royal Naval Division), the 14th (Light) Division, etc., are usually described by their numbers only.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It was judged inadvisable to mark the roads on the situation maps, already overladen with detail; they will be found on Map 1.

<sup>2</sup> The Yorkshire Regiment is usually called in the text by its ancient name "The Green Howards", and the composite dismounted cavalry formations and units are designated simply "dismounted brigade" or "dismounted regiment".

First-line and Second-line Territorial Force units are distinguished by a figure in front of the battalion or other number, thus : 1/8th London, 2/8th London, 1/3rd London or 2/3rd London Field Company R.E., or, when the First-line and Second-line had been amalgamated, simply 3/London.

Abbreviations employed occasionally are :—

B.E.F. for British Expeditionary Force ;

G.A.C. for Groupe d'armées du centre ;

G.A.E. for Groupe d'armées de L'Est ;

G.A.N. for Groupe d'armées du Nord ;

G.A.R. for Groupe d'armées de réserve ;

G.H.Q. for British General Headquarters ;

G.Q.G. for French Grand Quartier-Général (usually spoken “Grand Q.G.”) ;

O.H.L. for German *Oberste Heeresleitung* (German Supreme Command). *N.B.* — “G.H.Q.” in German means Grosses Haupt-Quartier, that is the Kaiser's Headquarters, political, military and naval, as distinguished from O.H.L.

R.I.R. (on maps) for Reserve Infantry Regiment.

The spellings of “lacrymatory” and “strongpoint” are arbitrary, and were selected as being shorter than the usual ones.

Officers are described by the rank which they held at the period under consideration. To save space the initials instead of the Christian names of knights are generally used.

The German pre-war practice of writing the plain name without “von”, when it is applicable and no rank or title is prefixed, has been adopted, *e.g.* “Falkenhayn” and not “von Falkenhayn”.

Summer Time for the B.E.F. began on the night of the 9th/10th March, but the German Army did not change over until the night of the 14th/15th April; thus, as German time is normally one hour ahead of Greenwich time, the clock times of the two Armies were alike during the period of the March offensive.

As the account of the fighting proceeds, in order to save the repetition of words pointing out that a division or brigade had already lost heavily and was reduced to a remnant, the abbreviations “Divn” or “Bde” are employed to denote this condition.

## MAPS AND SKETCHES

THE maps provided for this volume consist of a layered map on the 1 : 100,000 scale, for military students, covering the whole area of the operations, and two maps, north and south sheets, with a slight overlap, for each day of the battle ; they are in black and white for economy's sake. These maps do not show the defences in detail, only the front and support lines held in the morning of the day in question, with the troops occupying them, and the front line of the following morning. Specimens of the defences of corps in the Third and Fifth Armies are shown on Sketches 2 and 3, and details of defences on a larger scale on Sketches, 4, 9 and 10. The layered end-paper, Sketch A, is provided to show the general reader the ground fought over during the battle ; and the other end-paper, Sketch B, gives the military situation on the Western Front just before the battle opened.

There are also sketches for each day of the battle. It was impossible to put many place-names on them—the position of the smaller places in reference to well-known towns is described in the text—and they are intended to do no more than indicate the general result of the day's fighting and the relation of the line held to the Battle Zone and the front line held on the 21st March.

The spelling of the French 1 : 80,000 map has been followed ; thus Sailly Lorette appears, although on British maps it is marked as Sailly Laurette.



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## LIST OF BOOKS

### TO WHICH MOST FREQUENT REFERENCE IS MADE

**BOULLAIRE** : "Historique du 2<sup>e</sup> Corps de Cavalerie du 1<sup>er</sup> octobre 1914 au 1<sup>er</sup> janvier 1919". By General Boullaire. (Paris : Charles-Lavauzelle.)

A comprehensive corps history of 500 pages founded on the official records.

**FEHR** : "Die Märzoffensive 1918 an der Westfront". By Major Fehr. (Leipzig : Kohler.)

The author is an *Archivrat* in the *Reichsarchiv*, and his book gives a clear idea of the discussions which went on at O.H.L. in the months before the great offensive.

**FRENCH OFFICIAL ACCOUNT (F.O.A.)** : "Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre". Ministère de la Guerre : État-Major de l'Armée. Service Historique. (Paris : Imprimerie Nationale.)

"Tome VI., Volume I.", with two annexes containing documents and a case of maps, covers the period dealt with in this volume.

**FOCH** : "Mémoires". By Maréchal Foch. (Paris : Plon.)

**FOERSTER** : "Graf Schlieffen und der Weltkrieg". (2nd Edition 1925). By Lieut.-Colonel W. Foerster. (Berlin : Mittler.)

The author was for long a member, and since May 1934 has been President, of the *Reichsarchiv*. His book, an examination of German strategy, is divided into three parts, the last of which deals with "the great battle in France in the spring of 1918".

**GEHRE** : "Die deutsche Kraftverteilung während des Weltkrieg". By L. Gehre. (Berlin : Mittler.)

An examination of the War from the point of view of whether O.H.L. succeeded in assembling for decisive action in time and space the highest possible number of troops. It contains a large coloured diagram on squared paper which shows, under the various fronts and Armies, the German strength in divisions on the 15th and last day of every month of the War.

**Goes** : "Der Tag X. Die grosse Schlacht in Frankreich 21 März-5 April 1918". By Captain G. Goes. (Berlin : Kolk.)

The author is an *Archivrat* in the *Reichsarchiv*. His book, founded on official records and regimental histories, gives a very vivid account of the fighting in March 1918.

## LIST OF BOOKS

**GOUGH** : "The Fifth Army". By General Sir Hubert Gough. (Hodder & Stoughton.)

A personal narrative combined with a very accurate account of the operations in 1918.

**HERBILLON** : "Du Général en Chef au Gouvernement". By Colonel Herbillon. (Paris : Tallandier.)

The author throughout the War was one of the two liaison officers between the French Commander-in-Chief and the President and Government. His souvenirs, with copious extracts from his diary, give the situation as it was thought to be at the time, and the contemporary opinions of eminent persons.

**KUHL** : "Entstehung, Durchführung und Zusammenbruch der Offensive von 1918". By General von Kuhl. (Berlin : Deutsche Verlag.)

This is a most valuable source.

The author, the well-known Chief Staff Officer of General von Kluck in 1914, and later of Field-Marshal Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria, was one of the three technical assistants of the *Reichstag* Commission which enquired into the causes of the loss of the War. His book contains the report which he made to the Commission, divided into five parts : The Relative Strengths, the Reinforcement and Supply of the Armies, the Decision to Attack, the Spring Offensives, and the Defensive Battle in the Summer of 1918.

**LUDENDORFF** : "Meine Kriegserinnerungen", and "Urkunden der Obersten Heeresleitung über ihre Tätigkeit". By Erich Ludendorff. (Berlin : Mittler & Sohn.)

**M.W.B.** : The *Militär Wochenblatt*, in which a number of anniversary articles have appeared.

**PAINLEVÉ** : "Comment j'ai nommé Foch et Pétain". By Paul Painlevé. (Paris : Alcan.)

The author, Premier and Minister of War in 1917, deals with the period from the close of the Battles of the Somme 1916 until the nomination of General Foch to co-ordinate the Allied operations in France in 1918.

**PERSHING** : "Final Report of General John Pershing, Commander-in-Chief American Expeditionary Forces". (Washington : Government Printing Office.)

This covers both the period of organization and the operations.

**PERSHING EXPERIENCES** : "My Experiences in the World War". By John J. Pershing, Commander-in-Chief American Expeditionary Forces. (Hodder & Stoughton.)

General Pershing's personal story, founded on his diaries.

**POINCARÉ** : "Au Service de la France : Neuf Années de Souvenirs" By R. Poincaré. (Paris : Plon.)

An almost daily record of the War in ten volumes, the last of which covers 1918.

## LIST OF BOOKS

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“REGT. No. . . .” These are references to the War histories of German regiments. The volumes vary in length and value: some give detailed accounts of the operations with extracts from the reminiscences of combatants; others merely reproduce the official war diaries. Some of the latter type have been superseded by fuller accounts.

RUPPRECHT: “Mein Kriegstagebuch”. By Field-Marshal Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria. (Munich: Deutscher National Verlag.)

The day-by-day entries are of great value, as two of the attacking Armies were under the command of the author.

SCHWARTE iii.: “Der deutsche Landkrieg”. Edited by Lieut.-General M. Schwarte. (Leipzig: Barth.)

A compendium of the War in 12 volumes. Volume III. covers the operations on the Western Front from the time Hindenburg-Ludendorff took command until the Armistice, and contains extracts of operation orders and other useful matter.

THOMAS: “The History of the A.E.F.” By Captain Shipley Thomas. (New York: George H. Doran.)

An excellent summary by an officer of the American 1st Division who after the Armistice, whilst at the Army Intelligence School at Langres, collected the material for his book. The manuscript was checked by the Historical Branch of the General Staff of the U.S. Army.

WILSON: “Field-Marshal Sir Henry Wilson. His Life and Diaries” (two volumes). By Major-General Sir C. E. Callwell. (Cassell.)

### Note:

“1914” Vol. I.	The Official History of the Great War, Military Operations, France and Belgium, Volume I. (3rd Edition) (first part of 1914);	do.	Vol. II.
“1914” Vol. II.	Do. (close of 1914);	do.	Vol. III.
“1915” Vol. I.	Do. (first part of 1915);	do.	Vol. IV.
“1915” Vol. II.	Do. (close of 1915);	do.	Vol. V.
“1916” Vol. I.	Do. (first half of 1916).	do.	
“EGYPT & PALESTINE”	Volumes I. and II. The Official History of the Great War, Military Operations.		
“MACEDONIA”,	Volumes I. and II. The Official History of the Great War, Military Operations.		





# CALENDAR OF PRINCIPAL EVENTS

Mainly extracted from "Principal Events 1914-18" compiled by the Historical Section of the Committee of Imperial Defence,  
London. His Majesty's Stationery Office. 10s. 6d. net.

	Western Theatre.	Other Theatres.	Naval Warfare and General Events.
JANUARY 1918			
5th.	General von Hutier known to be on the Fifth Army front.	<i>Italy</i> : Halt on the Piave. (till June.)	During this month 57 British merchant ships (gross tonnage, 179,973) were lost by enemy action.
10th.	Military Representatives at Versailles recommend that British should take over more of the French front.	<i>Balkans</i> : Reorganization of the forces by General Guillaumat, and mobilization of the Royal Greek Army.	8th. President Wilson delivers message to Congress laying down the "Fourteen Points".
xxvii.	Orders issued by the War Office for the reorganization of divisions with 9 instead of 12 infantry battalions.	<i>Russia</i> : Brest-Litovsk Peace Conference in session.	
21st.	Ludendorff finally decides on the offensive against the British.	<i>Palestine</i> : Halt after capture of Jerusalem. (9th Dec. 1917.)	
23rd.	Military Representatives at Versailles recommend the formation of a General Reserve.	<i>Mesopotamia</i> : Euphrates minor operations. Lieut.-General Sir W. R. Marshall in command since 18th Nov. 1917.	20th. Naval action outside the Dardanelles. "Breslau" sunk, "Goeben" beached.
24th.	Lieut.-Gen. Hon. Sir H. Lawrence becomes Chief of the General Staff.	<i>East Africa</i> : Lettow-Vorbeck in Portuguese East Africa. (Since 17th Nov. 1917.)	23rd. Public Meals Order for meat rationing in restaurants and hotels.

CALENDAR OF PRINCIPAL EVENTS—(continued)

	Western Theatre.	Other Theatres.	Naval Warfare and General Events.
<b>JANUARY 1918—(continued)</b>			
30th.	Relief of French completed by the Fifth Army. Third Session of the Versailles Council.		28th. Air raid on London by 15 aeroplanes. Political strikes in Germany begin.
<b>FEBRUARY 1918</b>			
xxviii	Versailles Council create an Executive War Board of generals, and sanction the extension of the British front and the formation of a General Reserve.		9th. <i>Russia</i> : Peace signed at Brest Litovsk between the Central Powers and the Ukraine. <i>Russia</i> : Trotski announces state of war between the Central Powers and Russia is ended, but will not sign the formal peace.
16th.	British Intelligence states opinion that Germans will soon attack on the Western Front.		6th. Channel Ferry Service opened. 14th. Bolo Pasha condemned to death in Paris as enemy agent. 16th. Air raid on London by 6 aeroplanes.

18th.	General Sir H. Wilson appointed Chief of the Imperial General Staff.	18th.	<i>Russia</i> : German Armies resume hostilities against Russia.	17th. Air raid on London by 6 aeroplanes,
		21st.	<i>Palestine</i> : Jericho taken.	25th. First London ration order.
		25th.	<i>Balkans</i> : Peace negotiations between the Central Powers and Rumania begun.	25th. First London ration order.
		28th.	<i>Palestine</i> : General Liman von Sanders succeeds General von Falkenhayn in the Palestine Command.	25th. First London ration order.
			<i>Russia</i> : Negotiations resumed between the Central Powers and Russia.	25th. First London ration order.
				MARCH 1918
		2nd.	Enemy divisions on the Western Front known to number 181. General Otto von Below known to be on the Cambrai front.	During this month 82 British merchant ships (gross tonnage, 199,458) were lost by enemy action.
		3rd.	<i>Russia</i> : Peace signed between the Central Powers and Russia.	7th. Air raid on London
		8th-10th.	<i>Palestine</i> : Action of Tell Asur.	8th. Air raid on Paris.
		9th.	<i>Balkans</i> : Peace signed between the Central Powers and Rumania.	
			<i>Italy</i> : General Lord Cavan succeeds Sir H. Plumer in command of British troops.	
		10th.	Final order for German offensive issued.	
10th.				

CALENDAR OF PRINCIPAL EVENTS—(*continued*)

Western Theatre.	Other Theatres.	Naval Warfare and General Events.
MARCH 1918—( <i>continued</i> )		
		11th. Air raid on Paris.
12th.	<i>Finland</i> : German expedition lands at Abo.	12th. Three Zeppelins raid York-shire.
		13th. Zeppelin raid on Durham.
18th-19th.	Date and place of German attack discovered by the British Intelligence.	
21st.	First day of the German offensive.	<i>Palestine</i> : Passage of the Jordan.
22nd.	Kaiser confers Iron Cross with Golden Rays on Hindenburg.	
23rd.	Paris shelled by long-range gun.	<i>Palestine</i> : Es Salt taken.
xxx 26th.	Doullens Conference.	

## CHAPTER I

### THE GENERAL SITUATION TOWARDS THE CLOSE OF 1917

The Revolution in Russia—Sir William Robertson's Proposals in Preparation for the Defection of Russia—The Arrival of American Divisions—The Success of the Anti U-Boat Campaign—The State of the Forces of the Allied and Central Powers—The Meeting of the French and British Prime Ministers at Boulogne on 25th September—Sir Douglas Haig's Memorandum on Plans for 1918 and the French Demands for Extension of the British Front—The War Cabinet calls on Lord French and Sir Henry Wilson for Advice—Conference of General Pétain and Sir Douglas Haig—Caporetto—Shortage of British Reinforcements—The Rapallo Conference—The Creation of the Supreme War Council—The Military Situation at the Beginning of December.

(Sketches B, 1)

As the months passed in 1917, the grave condition of the Russian Army, and the fear that little more could be expected of it, had caused ever-increasing anxiety to the General Staffs in Paris and London. After the revolution in St. Petersburg, the proclamation of a Provisional Government, and the abdication of the Tzar Nicholas II. (12th-15th March), there had been practically a suspension of arms, even fraternization between Russian and German troops, on the Eastern Front. Any small hope that may have flickered up at the news of a Russian offensive—the so-called "Kerenski Offensive"—begun on the 29th June, was soon rudely quenched by the complete success of the German counter-offensive (18th-28th July).<sup>1</sup> The only result of the well-intentioned Russian enterprise was the destruction of the last few reliable elements remaining in the Army ; for these alone advanced to the attack, while the greater part of the three Armies engaged hung back, some units even

<sup>1</sup> By the German central reserve, of six divisions only, which was to achieve further important results at Riga in September and at Caporetto in October.

leaving the field. The collapse of Russia was bound to entail the complete submission of Rumania to Germany.<sup>1</sup>

As early as the 9th May, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Sir William Robertson, had addressed to the War Cabinet a paper entitled "The Military Effect of "Russia Seceding from the Entente". In this he said :

" While it may yet be too early to despair altogether "of further military assistance from her, if these disin-  
"tegrating tendencies [pacifist and revolutionary ideas]  
"continue, they must greatly impair her capacity for  
"continuing the War, and may ultimately render it im-  
"possible for her to do so; for it is folly to suppose that  
"an army without discipline and efficient services of main-  
"tenance can have any fighting value worthy the name.  
" There is also the danger that the Socialists may seize the  
"reins of Government and endeavour to put into effect  
"their policy of peace on a basis of 'no annexations' . . . .  
" The risk is sufficiently real to render it necessary to con-  
"sider the effects of such a contingency and to decide upon  
"our course of action in that event. . . . We should be  
"prepared for the worst, namely that the Central Powers  
"will be free to concentrate their forces against their  
"remaining enemies. . . . It must be assumed that the  
"whole of the German Army on the Eastern Front will be  
"available for operations in the West. This does not  
"mean that the whole of the 75 German divisions could  
"be transferred to France and placed in line on the  
"Western Front, as such numbers could probably not be  
"supplied by the existing railway system. The surplus  
"numbers would be kept in rear and used to relieve  
"divisions in the front line."<sup>2</sup>

The C.I.G.S. then went on to survey the situation in the various theatres of war and compare the total forces of the belligerent nations. He came to the conclusion that "the results of Russia making a separate peace need not entail disastrous consequences either in the Western theatre or "in Italy"; but he made it clear that, for economy in shipping, Great Britain "must keep her troops as near

<sup>1</sup> The Truce of Focsani was signed on 9th Dec.

<sup>2</sup> Between 1st June and 31st July 1917, 10 divisions were sent from France to reinforce the German Armies against Russia. There were on 1st Oct. 1917, that is five months later than when General Robertson wrote, and just before the transfer of forces from East to West—and therefore the date to bear in mind—88 German divisions on the Eastern Front, 140 on the Western, and 6 in general reserve on the way to Italy. Gehre.

"England as possible", and "the maximum number must be made available to assist in holding the Western Front, so that the Russian defection may not be followed by the collapse of France". Such economy of forces rendered it desirable, if not imperative, that we should "get away from Salonika as quickly as possible", and that if Russia did drop out of the War, we should "limit our forces in Eastern theatres to the minimum required for our essential interests".

No action was taken on this Memorandum, and General Robertson had to wait more than two months for another opportunity to raise the question, which the complete defeat of the Kerenski offensive then rendered urgent.

On the 25th July, an Inter-Allied Conference was held in Paris, Great Britain being represented by Mr. Lloyd George, Mr. Balfour, General Smuts, the First Sea Lord and the Chief of the Imperial General Staff. It was originally assembled to re-examine the situation and policy in the Balkans, because France and Serbia raised objections to one British division and a proportion of British heavy artillery being withdrawn from Macedonia for service in Palestine.<sup>1</sup> The question of Salonika was throughout the most prominent and occupied a part of every discussion which took place. Russian affairs were not debated, but Generals Foch, Pétain, Pershing, Cadorna and Sir William Robertson, used the occasion to meet and draw up for submission to the Conference two memoranda, one entitled "Suggestions for support to be given to Russia in order to prevent a possible defection", and the other, "Policy to adopt should Russia be forced out of the War".

In the first paper the five generals stated that, in accordance with the information furnished by their national representatives in Russia, there was every reason to believe that Russia might endeavour to sign a separate peace before the end of the year. They emphasized the gravity of the consequences of a defection of Russia, and called on the Allied Governments to make every sacrifice, and render all possible aid, political, economic and military, in order to keep Russia in the Alliance. They made the proposal that Great Britain might help as regards the Navy, France as regards the Army, and the U.S.A as regards the reorganization of transport, a mission being sent to Vladivostok for the purpose of ensuring the transit of railway material furnished by the U.S.A.

<sup>1</sup> See "Macedonia" Vol. II.

In the second paper the five generals said that the events then taking place in Russia rendered it necessary to examine the policy to be adopted if Russia were temporarily or permanently forced out of the War, so that the Central Powers would be free to dispose of a part or the whole of their forces then engaged on the Eastern Front.

The enemy, it was pointed out, might bring his maximum effort to bear on the Western Front before the main body of the American Army arrived : in this case, the decisive struggle would take place on the Franco-British front ; to meet such a contingency the Allies must decide to leave on all other fronts only the minimum force required for their defence : it was calculated, if this decision were taken immediately following on the defection of Russia, and if adequate tonnage were available, that the Allies would retain in France a superiority of force up to the 1st January 1918, which they would subsequently lose in a gradually increasing proportion up to the 1st June 1918 : from this date, when General Pershing thought there would be 20 American divisions in France, the disproportion would decrease at the rate of the arrival of the American contingent : in the interval the German numerical superiority would not be sufficient to break through a well organized defence : counter-measures to deal with any attempt of the Germans to extend their front of action to Switzerland had already been considered : the enemy's numerical superiority in France would be reduced if the Italian Army, in addition to holding 40 Austrian divisions on its front, was prepared to lend all or part of its divisions in reserve for disposal behind the threatened front. Possible enemy action against Italy, the Macedonian front, or the Asiatic-Turkish front was also shortly mentioned.

The five generals finally recommended :—

(a) the adoption of a purely defensive attitude in the secondary theatres and reduction of forces in those theatres to those necessary for defensive purposes ;

(b) acceleration to the maximum of the preparation of the American Army and of the transport of American troops ;

(c) preparation of the necessary tonnage for the conveyance of troops withdrawn from the secondary theatres ;

(d) unification of action on the Western Front by the help of a permanent Inter-Allied military organization which should study and make preparations for the rapid movements of troops from one theatre to another.

Nothing came of the presentation of these papers except a proposal from the British Prime Minister for an early attack of the Allies against Austria from the Italian Front. This would take time to prepare, and against it General Cadorna urged that he could not undertake any extensive operations between October and the following April.

On his return home on the 29th July, Sir William Robertson prepared and submitted to the War Cabinet a comprehensive memorandum on "The present military situation in Russia and its effects on our future military plans", summing up the previous debates and papers on the subject. He began by inviting the attention of the War Cabinet to his paper of the 9th May. There was no good reason for the Russian retreat which had just taken place, he said, other than a refusal to fight, with the result that some sixty or seventy Russian divisions were running away from some eighteen Austrian and German divisions : it was impossible to rely on the Russians holding the new line to which it was said they had retired : the most effective method of averting further Russian disasters was to continue to bring the utmost pressure in the next few weeks on the Western Front (the Third Battle of Ypres was to begin in two days). The C.I.G.S. insisted that it was necessary to look ahead, although he did not consider it probable that the enemy would for a long time be able to withdraw the whole of his troops from the Eastern Front. In conclusion, he recapitulated the recommendations of the five Allied generals as regards aid to Russia ; he advised economy of shipping to provide against the prolongation of the War and to ensure transport for the American troops, cutting down of commitments in secondary theatres, and a review of the so-called "War Aims".

Another two months passed : general aid was continued to Russia ; the economy of shipping was forced on the Allies by the activities of the German U-boats, which meant that a monthly reduction of 500,000 high-seas tonnage had to be faced ; but nothing was done as regards lessening commitments in the secondary theatres.

On the 15th September M. Kerenski, the premier of the Provisional Government, having just overcome his chief rival, General Kornilov, thereby seeming to have strengthened his position, proclaimed a Republic, controlled by a Council of Five, with himself at its head. Soon, however, it became evident that M. Kerenski was losing influence, and that the growing disorder in Russia might quickly

degenerate into anarchy. It was not till then that the French and British Governments began seriously to apprehend a complete desertion by Russia of the Allied cause.

The power of the United States when developed, it was true, would more than compensate for the loss of Russia as an Ally ; but, although two American divisions had arrived in France, there was very much to be done before an American Army would be ready to take the field. General Pershing was fully aware of the gravity of the situation. The recommendations which he had placed before his Government<sup>1</sup> on the 6th July 1917 had contemplated the despatch of "at least 1,000,000 men by May 1918", representing 24 divisions apart from Lines of Communication troops ; whereas the War Department plan had calculated on no more than 650,000 men by the 15th June 1918. Whatever number could be sent, all excepting a small nucleus of Regulars and marines had to be organized, trained, clothed, equipped and provided with warlike apparatus, so that the British General Staff did not rely at best on more than 12 American divisions arriving in France by April, and the majority of these would only be fit to relieve trained divisions on quiet fronts.<sup>2</sup> The main factor in the problem, however, was the amount of British shipping available for war purposes, in which total had to be included tonnage required to transport steel, coal and food to the Allies. America could supply part only of the vessels which she required, and the shipping resources of the Allies were already strained, apparently to the utmost, in the maintenance of their own armies, not only on the Western Front, but in Macedonia, Palestine, Egypt, Mesopotamia and East Africa. The Empire communications had also to be kept open, the needs of the people and the manufactories of the Homeland provided for, and great quantities of war material and other necessaries transported for our Allies in Europe. There was the question, too, of what proportion of the Fleet could be withdrawn from the fighting line for escort duty. It seemed evident, therefore, that for many months no appreciable help could be expected from American troops, and that the Entente Allies must

<sup>1</sup> Pershing, p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> On 21st March 1918 there were four "combat" divisions (as distinguished from L. of C. formations) in France (each being about 27,000 strong, nearly the equivalent of two British divisions) ; one more had just arrived, and another was on the seas. The next began to embark on 4th April. Pershing, p. 32, and Thomas, pp. 484, 486 and 463.

meanwhile depend on their own Armies, with such help, if any, as Russia might be able and willing to give. The extent of that help might, in some degree, depend on the progress of hostilities on the Western Front : the more fully the enemy could be kept employed there during the next few months, the less would he be able to take advantage of Russia's weakness and the more would the hands of the better elements of the Russian population be strengthened. However, in September 1917 there seemed no reason to doubt the ability of France, Italy, Belgium and the British Empire to hold their own until the American Armies could arrive on the scene, even if the four Powers themselves could not succeed in bringing about the collapse of Germany and Austria earlier.

The submarine campaign against Great Britain, at first so alarming, had been unflinchingly met, with the help of the destroyers furnished by the American Navy, and was on the point of reaching "slack water". The turn of the tide was at hand, and no serious doubt was felt as to the ultimate defeat of the U-boats. The Convoy System,<sup>1</sup> begun experimentally in June, was proving a complete success. Between February and August the Admiralty had taken a number of other measures, which collectively also served to lower the monthly total of sunken merchant vessels, so that in September, for the first time since the campaign began, the U-boat commanders changed their tactics. This fact did not, however, prevent the total losses for the month dropping to a lower figure than had been recorded since the inauguration of unrestricted submarine warfare. In consequence, the German Government were reduced to the expedient of grossly exaggerating the U-boat successes—an obvious confession of failure—in order to keep up the spirits of their nationals and their Allies.

The Armies of the B.E.F. had carried out successfully during 1917 several offensives on as large a scale as the forces available permitted ; the retirement of the Germans to the Hindenburg Line, followed as it was by " Vimy " and " Messines ", had greatly encouraged the troops, so that they had entered on the Flanders offensive on the 31st July in good heart, confident of their power to break down the enemy's resistance. Though this feeling had been considerably damped by the bad weather and mud, and though progress had been slow, they had, in spite of the opposition offered by enemy " pill boxes " (ferro-concrete

<sup>1</sup> See " Naval Operations " Vol. V., particularly pp. 186-42.

machine-gun posts), and other adverse factors, steadily gained ground. The heaviest losses and the worst hardships, during the fighting in October and November (officially known as the First and Second Battles of Passchendaele, 12th October and 26th October-10th November), were yet to come.<sup>1</sup>

The man-power behind the French Armies was running low and they had been considerably shaken in the spring by unexpected losses and disappointed hopes—it was common knowledge that there had been mutinies. Under General Pétain's care, however, they had more or less recovered their morale. To restore their confidence in themselves still further, the French Commander-in-Chief was about to launch a small limited offensive : the Battle of Malmaison (23rd October-1st November). His plans seemed to be confined to saving the French Army from heavy casualties, so that Sir Douglas Haig felt grave fears—which influenced his course of action throughout the later part of 1917 and the beginning of 1918—that its fighting value was far lower than General Pétain cared to admit. M. Painlevé, who had replaced M. Ribot as Prime Minister on the 12th September, retaining the portfolio of War which he had held under M. Ribot, also seemed more interested in withdrawing the older classes of French troops from the trenches than in considering plans for the ensuing year.

The Italian Armies had shown themselves at least a match for the Austro-Hungarian forces opposed to them : their progress though definite had necessarily been slow on account of the difficulties of their mountainous theatre of war, but in the Eleventh Battle of the Isonzo (17th August-12th September) they had driven the Austrians from their last prepared positions. Then General Cadorna, after announcing to the Allies that he intended to continue the offensive, and obtaining from the French and British the loan of one hundred heavy guns for the purpose, had suddenly sent a telegram stating that he had abandoned his plan.<sup>2</sup> Peace propaganda was, unfortunately, very active in Italy, and causing some anxiety ; so much so, that the Italian Government alleged they could not furnish

<sup>1</sup> According to a return compiled by the British Section of the Supreme War Council, dated 25th Feb. 1918, the total casualties from 31st July to 3rd Oct. 1917 were 188,787. From that date to 18th Nov., another 106,110 were added.

<sup>2</sup> The reason given to the British representatives who visited the Italian Front was that, after the middle of September, the Isonzo was liable to come down in flood and sweep away the bridges.

reinforcements for their troops, nor undertake to use compulsion to bring into the Army any of the classes relied on to fill up the cadres. There were no signs as yet—at least none had been reported—of the impending Austro-German counter-offensive which was eventually initiated at Caporetto on the 24th October. What General Cadorna feared was a German offensive in the Trentino, which would cut off the Italian Armies in Venetia.

The Belgian Army, rested and reinforced, had shown that, as in the first days of the War, it could be relied on for an effort greater than mere determined resistance.

The strength of the Central Powers appeared to be definitely on the wane. Austria-Hungary was manifestly so near collapse that it was improbable she could be induced to face another campaign. In March Kaiser Carl had made use of his brother-in-law, Prince Sixte of Bourbon-Parma, to approach the French President with suggestions for the conclusion of a speedy peace. Turkey was hardly capable of further active operations on any considerable scale without the help of German specialist detachments and German material and money. Bulgaria, having gained possession of the territory which she coveted, was correctly reported to be unwilling to make further serious effort. In fact, everything seemed to point to the conclusion that Germany's Allies were urgently desirous of peace. Further, the so-called "peace resolution" of the *Reichstag* of the 19th July 1917, which the new German Chancellor, Michaelis, had declared to contain a policy, "as he understood it", of "an honourable peace without annexations and by means of understanding", had been taken by Germany's Allies as a sign of her own war-weariness and desire for peace. Their belief in her invincibility—on which their hope of ultimate success had from the outset been based—was beginning to waver. The very successes of the Central Powers in Russia, Serbia and Rumania, had added to the calls on Germany's armed forces; they had lengthened the front line and had involved the occupation of the conquered territories, without repaying as much as had been expected in the way of the material resources of which she and her Allies were so sorely in need. On the Western Front the German Armies had in 1917 suffered repeated reverses and, though still fighting strongly, showed signs that the prolonged strain was telling on them, and that their limit of endurance might be exceeded if the Allied pressure were maintained. In the Fatherland itself

the food supply was believed to be failing—in April 1917 even the Army bread ration had been cut down from 750 to 500 grammes.<sup>1</sup> The consequent want and hardship, when added to ever-growing disappointment, discontent and disillusion, was creating a difficult situation.

Meantime, the long agony of Passchendaele continued, the state of Russia grew from doubtful to desperate, and many weeks passed ; but no agreement was reached between the French and British Governments as to the course to be pursued in 1918.

The firm conviction that the British Empire was not bearing its proportionate share of the War in the main theatre, that it had engaged large resources in “colonial wars” for its own special benefit, coupled with anxiety due to the dwindling reserves of man-power in France, had led to repeated requests both from the French Government and from G.Q.G. for extensions of the British front. Knowing the state of General Pétain’s Armies and his difficulties, and ready to compromise to such extent as he could, Sir Douglas Haig had from time to time taken over more line as the growing strength of his forces permitted. But still more was now being asked of him. At the time it was represented to the British Government by the French Premier that renewed and pressing demands, which could not be resisted, were being made by the Chamber that more men should be released for agriculture and more leave given to the troops. But the real reason now seems to have been that General Pétain had come to the conclusion that to make the situation of the French Army safe should Russia collapse and Germany bring greatly increased forces against the Western Front—what might happen to the British he did not consider—he must have a reserve of 40 divisions ; and that, unless the British were compelled to take over more of the line, he could not find them.<sup>2</sup> To settle the matter, the

<sup>1</sup> It now appears that the shortage of food in Germany was due not so much to the lack of supplies—there was enough in the *Reich* alone, without imports, to provide half the quantity consumed by the population in peace time—as to poor organization and inefficient distribution, the railway lines and rolling stock being required for troop movements and supply.

<sup>2</sup> F.O.A. vi. (i), p. 7, from which the following is translated :—

“Pétain had fixed at a minimum of 40 the number of our divisions to be maintained in reserve. The transfer to the reserve of such a considerable French force, and the necessity for the British Army to make an important effort of the same kind, appeared to the General Commanding-in-Chief the first of the conditions to be fulfilled in order to be in a position to ward off the different manoeuvres which must be anticipated on the part of the enemy, and particularly the one which he judged the most

two Prime Ministers, Mr. Lloyd George and M. Painlevé, accompanied by their respective Chiefs of the Staff, Generals Sir William Robertson and Foch, met at Boulogne on the 25th September. M. Painlevé drew a somewhat doleful picture of the French situation, stating that the casualties per month, including sickness, amounted to 54,000, say 650,000 a year, and only 225,000 men would be available to replace them. After deciding that the whole of the French and British heavy artillery in Italy should be withdrawn, as General Cadorna was not pursuing the offensive operations for which the guns had been lent, the Conference recorded :—

“ The British Government, having accepted, in principle, the extension of the line held by the British Army on the Western Front, the two Governments are agreed that the question of the amount of the extension and the time at which it should take place, should be left for arrangements between the two Commanders-in-Chief ”.<sup>1</sup>

On the day following this Conference, the Prime Minister, accompanied by General Sir William Robertson and Colonel Sir Maurice Hankey, the Secretary of the War Cabinet, paid a visit to Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig at

“ probable, that is an attack against the Franco-British front combined with an outflanking movement through Switzerland.

“ Only the relief by the British of a part of our forces could permit us to commence the constitution of our mass of reserve. The operation, besides, would have the advantage of better dividing between the Allied Armies the burden of the front comprised between Switzerland and the North Sea. Of this, the French Army guarded 580 km. and the British Army only 150 km. On 22nd Sept. General Pétain, invited by the Government to formulate proposals judged suitable by him for the relief of our troops by our Allies, demanded that, beginning on 1st Nov., the British Army should extend its right as far as Berry au Bac, or at least “as far as Coucy le Chateau.”

<sup>1</sup> This is all that was officially recorded of the Conference ; but M. Painlevé has stated in his book, “ Comment j’ai nommé Foch et Pétain ” (1923), p. 245, that, “ after a discussion ‘ seul à seul ’ in a railway carriage, with Mr. Lloyd George, we came to agreement on the main lines of a scheme which envisaged the immediate organization of an Inter-Allied War Cabinet, having as its permanent executive an Inter-Allied General Staff, over which General Foch would preside. The new Chief of the Inter-Allied General Staff would have under his orders behind the junction of the two forces the Franco-British reserves until such time as public opinion in England would permit of his being made generalissimo of the two Armies. As British representative in the new organization Mr. Lloyd George proposed to designate General [Sir Henry] Wilson, whose friendship and thorough accord with General Foch dated from long before the War.”

This important agreement between the two Prime Ministers, changing the whole system of Command, was not made known to the C.I.G.S. ; nor was the advice of the General Staff obtained on the subject.

G.H.Q. He requested the Commander-in-Chief to submit a considered opinion as to the rôle the British forces should play in the event of the Russians dropping out of the war—and, he added, the Italians and French doing very little. Mr. Lloyd George mentioned at the same time that the French Premier had drawn his attention to the French desire that the British should take over more of the line. To this Sir Douglas Haig at once replied that the Government should set their faces against doing any such thing until the plans for next year had been settled. As regards these plans, he was of the definite opinion that the sound policy for the Allies was to assume a defensive attitude everywhere except on the Western Front, which had been accepted by the British Government as the decisive one, and that the necessary troops should be selected and trained for this front. The Prime Minister appeared to think that no offensive by the Allies would be possible in France and Flanders in 1918.

The Field-Marshal's views were submitted in a memorandum dated the 8th October.<sup>1</sup> In face of the fact that the power of the French to resist a great attack—like that at Verdun in 1916—was now very doubtful, he recommended that the British Armies, to the fullest possible degree, should be concentrated on the Western Front, and that the aim should be to limit the enemy's freedom of action by maintaining the offensive there. Beat the Germans, he said, and the rest will follow: it would be “not only unsound but highly dangerous to undertake any “of the various indirect means which have been suggested “to sap Germany's power by operating against her Allies. “. . . Such a course is sometimes wise and offers the best “chance of success, but not under the conditions of this “war. . . . Success on the Western Front is the only “alternative to an unsatisfactory peace. . . . If Russia “failed her Allies, there would be need in France of every “man, gun and aeroplane that could be provided. . . . “Risks must therefore be taken elsewhere and commit-“ments in other theatres cut down to the minimum “necessary to protect really vital interests.” He ex-pressed his confidence in the ability of the British Armies to carry out offensive operations, with due assistance from the Allied forces, provided certain conditions were fulfilled. These conditions were :—

First, the British Armies in France should consist of not

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 1.

less than the existing number of 62 divisions,<sup>1</sup> which should be brought up to full establishment as soon as possible, or, at any rate, in time for drafts to be fully trained in France before offensive operations began.

Second, further drafts to replace wastage should be trained and sent to France in time to take their places in the ranks when required.

Third, the full establishment, as already asked for, of guns, munitions and aeroplanes should be furnished.

Fourth, every facility for training, rest and leave should be afforded to the troops.

Fifth, the British Armies should not be required to take over more line from the French.

In conclusion, he said, "One more indispensable condition of decisive success on the Western Front is that the War Cabinet should have a firm faith in its possibility and resolve finally and unreservedly to concentrate our resources on seeking it, and at once".

At the time Sir Douglas Haig wrote, many of the units of his 62 divisions were already—that is before the final stages of Passchendaele—considerably below establishment, the drafts sent from England having been insufficient to replace wastage. The shortage in the infantry battalions furnished by the British Isles alone amounted to between seventy and eighty thousand men :<sup>2</sup> that is, considerably less than one-half of the Passchendaele casualties at that date had been replaced. Thus many units were already in a very weak state, which not only reduced efficiency in action, but retarded recovery in battalions brought out of the line for rest after severe fighting ; for it was by now definitely established that a unit which was quickly filled up with reinforcements after heavy losses resumed fighting efficiency in a comparatively short time, whereas if delay occurred in providing it with drafts and the survivors were left out of action brooding over their depleted ranks, the subsequent recovery was very much slower.

The number of British divisions then serving in other theatres of war, in addition to large numbers of Indian Army troops, was four in Macedonia,<sup>3</sup> seven (with three cavalry divisions) in Egypt and Palestine, and one in Mesopotamia. There were also three in garrison in India, and eight others,

<sup>1</sup> Not including 5 cavalry divisions, or the 2 Portuguese divisions attached to the B.E.F.

<sup>2</sup> The Dominion units, generally, were kept up to establishment.

<sup>3</sup> Also 8 French and one Italian, besides Serbians.

with 13 cyclist brigades, reserved for Home Defence, these latter divisions being composed chiefly of men considered too young, or otherwise unfit, for service abroad.<sup>1</sup> Cavalry, artillery not forming part of divisions, air forces, all the other various services and material required for the field, were distributed between the different theatres of war, and reinforcements of men, munitions and supplies despatched to them in proportion to their estimated relative importance.

This question of relative importance was, however, very difficult to determine, lying, as it did, at the root of all strategical plans. Opinions on it were by no means unanimous. All responsible military authorities were at the time agreed that the German Armies were the mainstay of the Central Alliance; that their decisive defeat, or surrender in order to avoid a decisive defeat, would alone bring victory; and that, whether one liked it or not, the struggle must be fought out on the Western Front. These officers—the so-called “Westerners”—held that the way to attain final victory was to concentrate the largest possible force on the Western Front and to employ it there with the utmost vigour until German resistance was broken down. The “Easterners”—of whom Sir Henry Wilson was the only important representative in the Army, and he had been a bitter opponent of the Gallipoli expedition and became a “Westerner” as soon as he was appointed C.I.G.S.—doubted the possibility of success by such action. They considered operations in France, at best, unnecessarily wasteful of life, and remained convinced, despite all arguments to the contrary, that an easier way to victory could be found. These opponents of concentration to smash the German Armies favoured the indirect method. They advocated that Germany’s strength should be sapped by seeking, first, to overcome her weaker Allies with the ultimate object of entering Germany by a “back-door”, and that meantime operations on the Western Front should be limited to defence, coupled with such local offensives as could be undertaken without serious risk of heavy casualties. These different theories had been in existence since the end of 1914, and their relative advantages and disadvantages debated time and again. The strategy adopted had, for this and other reasons, been essentially a compromise in execution, although the policy adopted in December 1915

<sup>1</sup> For the numbers in the various theatres and at home on 1st Jan. 1918, see Chapter II. and its Appendices.

was never definitely changed. "France and Flanders" remained officially the "main theatre",<sup>1</sup> but offensive operations on a large scale hampering those on the Western Front had been undertaken in Palestine and Mesopotamia, and continued in the German colonies; lastly, at French desire, considerable forces had been employed in Macedonia. The initiative during the past two years had been so much in the hands of the Allies that up to date the deleterious effect of dissemination of force had been no more than a limitation of the results gained by offensives undertaken in the various theatres. But now the change in the strategical situation which might be anticipated from a collapse of Russia involved greater dangers than mere limitation of success. There had been "Westerners" and "Easterners" in Germany also—the terms there referring to the French and Russian theatres—and equally divided counsels; now her Armies would be able to give practically their whole attention to the West. Following the policy of dealing with weaker enemies first, she might decide to throw herself on Italy; but success in the Italian theatre would hardly end the War or prevent the American Armies from assembling in France. After forces had been liberated from the Eastern Front, the Germans would be able to concentrate, and no doubt would concentrate, a large additional number of divisions on the Western Front. Unless, therefore, the Allies also concentrated to meet the danger, the initiative might pass to the enemy, and place him in a position to gain great, even decisive, victories. Even if it were possible to reach and defeat Germany's Allies, they would scarcely give in whilst she was unbeaten, and the consequent weakening of the Western Front would entail risks which would become the more serious as the prospects of Russia falling out of the War increased. For these reasons, Sir Douglas Haig urged immediate concentration on the Western Front, which now, as before, he held to be the decisive theatre.

His recommendation that no more line should be taken over from the French touched another factor of the problem of the best distribution of the Allied Forces.

It was certainly true that the French held more than Sketch B. three times as much as the British—about 350 miles as against 100—with 108 divisions of 9 battalions each (972 in all), as against 62 divisions of 18 battalions each (806 in

<sup>1</sup> See "1916" Vol. I. p. 10.

all); but most of their front was "quiet".<sup>1</sup> No one seriously expected an attack east of St. Mihiel on the 150 miles of front where less than one-seventh of the French Army was disposed. Length of front in proportion to numbers even on the "active" fronts was not the criterion. The French had adopted the method of passive defence on their portion of the line, relying on their strength in artillery—of which they had nearly double that of the British—to defeat any limited offensive of the Germans. The British, on the other hand, had throughout preferred an active, even aggressive, defensive, constantly harrying the enemy by fire attacks and raids. In consequence, the strength maintained by the Germans opposite the British was greater; during 1916-17 they had constantly retained on the British front nearly half the total force of the German divisions in the Western theatre of war; and this half, which included a high proportion of the enemy's best divisions, had been kept fully employed. Since May 1917 the British had borne the brunt of the fighting, and had undertaken, by agreement with General Pétain, the main offensive operations. The whole French front, except for an enterprise (20th-26th August) to recover a small strip of ground before Verdun, had been definitely "quiet".

There was yet a more essential reason for a comparatively short front being assigned to the British Expeditionary Force. Behind the southern and central portions of the general front, there was ample room for manœuvre. In the northern part there was none. The narrow strip of land between the British front-line defences and the coast left little space for retirement, and into it had to be crowded all the establishments and apparatus of five Armies. The great proportion of the stores and munitions they required had to be dealt with at a few small ports. Dunkirk was almost daily under enemy shell fire, not to mention aerial bombing, while quite a short enemy advance would bring Calais and Boulogne also within range of German guns. In 1914 the small British Expeditionary Force had fallen back with the French towards the south; its original main base at Havre, hardly opened, had been

<sup>1</sup> There had, for instance, been no fighting since 8th Jan. 1916 at Hartmannsweilerkopf, once the focus of a severe struggle ("Hartmanns-weilerkopf", by G. Goes, p. 182). General R. Alexander (U.S. Army), in his "Memories of the World War", p. 111, speaks of his 77th Division coming "from a peaceful sector in the Vosges, where an occasional trench raid and routine gun-fire had been the limit of warlike activity".

transferred without any loss worth mention to St. Nazaire. To carry out such a movement in 1918, even if possible,<sup>1</sup> would entail the abandonment of immense quantities of munitions and stores ; also of the Béthune coalfields, from which the French drew such an important part of their coal supply. General Pétain, in a letter to the British Commander-in-Chief, had indeed described the front covering them as "the most important from an economic point of view".<sup>2</sup> Even if, in the event of a forced retreat, any considerable proportion of the troops could escape, they would require to be re-equipped with apparatus of every kind, and their new bases and new lines of communication would certainly clash with the recently organized American establishments. Finally, it was of the utmost importance to British sea power not to allow the enemy to gain possession of the French Channel ports. The difference in conditions on the French and British fronts was not, however, generally understood outside the Armies.

Sir Douglas Haig's report was laid before a meeting of the War Cabinet on the 11th October ; but was not considered in detail. Mr. Lloyd George, after summarizing the general situation, proceeded to outline the various alternative policies which were open to the Allies. These, in his opinion, were four :—

First, to concentrate all possible forces on the Western Front as advocated in Sir Douglas Haig's report, with which Sir William Robertson stated he was in general agreement. All other theatres would not only be treated as subordinate, but the forces in them would be reduced to the lowest possible figure consistent with safety.

Second, to concentrate mainly on the Western Front, while leaving the forces now operating in other theatres to be as active as possible with the means at their disposal.

Third, as advocated by the French, to stand everywhere on the defensive, rely on drastic economic warfare to weaken the enemy, and await the development of the forces of the United States, only resorting to such offensive action as would render the defence effective.

Fourth, which he called "knocking the props from 'under Germany'", to counter the loss of Russia by

<sup>1</sup> It might require a flank march, and the Americans were in possession of the ports which would be wanted as bases for the British.

<sup>2</sup> On 2nd Feb. 1918 General Pétain told the Supreme War Council that "he had always admitted that the part held by the British was the most "vital along the whole front, and that the density of the troops holding "that front must be double that of the sector held by the French Army".

depriving Germany of her Allies. This might be done by dealing a heavy military blow against Turkey, and then offering her terms designed to buy her out. Bulgaria might then be induced to abandon the War.<sup>1</sup>

The scheme for an offensive against Turkey may be discussed and dismissed at this point, as it was quickly abandoned. It had been in the Prime Minister's mind for some time. At a meeting of the War Policy Committee of the War Cabinet on the 5th October he had laid stress on the desirability of eliminating Turkey from the list of our enemies. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff had at once taken up the matter, and had telegraphed to General Sir Edmund Allenby<sup>2</sup> to ask what forces he would require to inflict a heavy defeat on the Turks and occupy the Jerusalem-Jaffa line. He had received the reply that, in view of the reinforcements which the Germans might send, thirteen additional divisions would be necessary. In his own written opinion, headed "Future Military Policy",<sup>3</sup> handed later to the Secretary of the War Cabinet, Sir William Robertson disclosed much the same views as Sir Douglas Haig. He felt that it was quite impossible to say how long it would take, or how many troops would be required, to eliminate Turkey : if it were to our interest to drive Turkey out of the War, it was to Germany's to keep her in ; the German Supreme Command would no doubt assist her as might be necessary : and for this purpose the enemy communications were better than our own : we could send by sea no more than two divisions a month ; the Germans could transfer by rail at least ten divisions a month from West to East. Admiral Sir John Jellicoe, the First Sea Lord, in a paper dated the 11th October, demonstrated even more strongly the objections to the scheme. He showed in detail that to reinforce Egypt with even six divisions—a total which it was thought might suffice for a landing at Alexandretta, this being an alternative scheme, since thirteen could obviously not be spared for Palestine—would interfere with the whole traffic in the Mediterranean : to transport four divisions would take 65 days : six divisions would take 100 days : the consequence of allotting ships for this purpose would

<sup>1</sup> There was no mention of the Prime Minister's earlier project of Jan. 1917, for putting Austria out of the war by an advance through the Balkans, or an offensive through the Julian Alps towards Laibach and Vienna.

<sup>2</sup> See "Egypt and Palestine" Vol. II. pp. 26-7.

<sup>3</sup> Appendix 2.

reduce food imports into the United Kingdom, also the supply of coal and wheat for Italy, where the coal shortage was already very grave : further, the Navy could not undertake fresh overseas escort duties without restricting the offensive and defensive measures which were now bearing fruit. At the moment, too, thousands of American troops were unable to cross the Atlantic for lack of transport.

The Prime Minister's Turkish plans having been shown to be impracticable, his next proposal, which was adopted, was that Field-Marshal Lord French, commanding the Home Forces, and Lieut.-General Sir Henry Wilson, who since the 1st September had been G.O.C. Eastern Command (headquarters London)—both had been present at the meeting—should be invited to give the War Cabinet, direct and not through the General Staff, the benefit of their advice regarding the military situation, and put their general conclusions on paper.<sup>1</sup>

Their opinions, which were both submitted on the 20th October, did not prove to be of much assistance. Five-sixths of Lord French's paper was devoted to a criticism of the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies in France and of the Chief of the Imperial General Staff ; but in the closing pages he gave it definitely as his opinion that for the moment the British Forces in France should adopt Mr. Lloyd George's third alternative, a defensive attitude, and alternatives one and two should not be sanctioned. He added that it would be necessary for the British to take over some more of the French line. As regards the fourth alternative, he thought it would have been the correct course to adopt earlier, but it was now too late in the year to be considered. In conclusion, he advocated the establishment of a Superior War Council—about which Mr. Lloyd George had already talked to him—composed of the Prime Ministers or their selected representatives and one or more generals from each of the Allied countries : this council should at once proceed to appreciate the general situation and formulate plans. Thus he virtually postponed any decision about immediate action.

Sir Henry Wilson's paper was mainly a general survey

<sup>1</sup> It has been said that " a Government should either back or sack "their official military advisers. To take outside advice leads either to " compromise or friction, or both." Neither of the two officers consulted by the Prime Minister had any responsibility for the advice they might give as regards operations in the theatres of war. The Commander-in-Chief of the B.E.F. had declined to find any employment in France for Sir Henry Wilson when the latter at the request of General Pétain had ceased to be Chief Liaison Officer at G.Q.G.

of the War so far as it had gone. He did not discuss the four alternatives suggested as such, but proceeded to bring forward, in the shape of questions, three factors which had occurred to him as a means of securing decisive numerical superiority. He began by asking first, whether we could eliminate some of our smaller enemies ; secondly, whether we could increase our man-power ; and, thirdly, whether we could provide an enormous and overwhelming increase in guns, aeroplanes and other munitions. Answering these questions, and incidentally dealing with the fourth alternative, he definitely decided that it would be impossible to send an expedition against the Turks (who must be the first of our smaller enemies attacked) "this winter", and wrong to send it "next spring or summer": numbers could not be decisively increased until the American Army was in very large force, which would "certainly not be "the case in 1918": as regards material, decisive superiority could not be obtained without absolute co-ordination of the efforts of England, France, Italy and America, and their united energies concentrated on this one work. His remedy, like Lord French's, was "the establishment of an "intelligent, effective and powerful direction. . . . A small "War Cabinet of the Allies. . . . Such a body would view "the war as a whole, . . . lay out the broad line of action "for the next twelve or twenty-four months, . . . take over "the superior direction of the war."

Both memoranda, therefore, advocated not a course of action which might lead to the defeat of the enemy, but the formation of a politico-military council which in the course of time might suggest such a course. Their proposals were to materialise as the Versailles Supreme War Council. No definite action, however, was taken towards this end until the beginning of November.

Sir Douglas Haig, when informed of the decision of the Prime Ministers' Conference at Boulogne, on the 25th September, that he should discuss with General Pétain the taking over of part of the French line, had, as he was engaged in an offensive, left the initiative to the French Commander-in-Chief, and it was not until the 18th October that he met him, by invitation, at Amiens. General Pétain stated that he had been ordered by his "Comité de Guerre" to discuss with him a further extension of the British front:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> At a meeting of the "Comité de Guerre" on the 1st Oct., at which General Pétain was present, he was instructed to ask for an extension of the British front, and "gladly agreed to do so". Herbillon, p. 145.

that M. Painlevé and General Foch, when on a visit to London on the 9th October, had raised the question with Mr. Lloyd George and General Sir Henry Wilson, who was with him,<sup>1</sup> and that, after examination of reports on the state of the French Army, General Wilson had recommended that the British should take over some more of the French line, and Mr. Lloyd George had agreed to it.<sup>2</sup> General Pétain assumed that Russia would drop out of the War, and that arrangements should be made for a defensive, not for an offensive, attitude. To this view he clung throughout the early part of 1918. He considered that the Germans might bring 30, 40 or even 50 extra divisions to the Western Front, and stated that he had no reserve, that his losses were 40,000 a month, and that the French divisions were being reduced to a hundred, each to contain no more than 6,000 infantry.<sup>3</sup> He asked that the British should relieve his Sixth Army, that is extend their right to a point south-west of Barisis, thus taking over a six-division front.

Sketch 1.

Sir Douglas Haig, without accepting, as General Pétain obviously desired, the principle of taking over more line, said that he would do his best to meet his wishes, and would transfer southwards four divisions, now in the Coast Sector under General Rawlinson, to carry out the relief: if he were compelled to take over the whole of the Sixth Army front he would not be able to carry out an effective offensive in the spring. He then read and handed over to General Pétain a paper, in French. In this it was stated that if the Passchendaele operations were to be continued, it would be clearly impossible to begin taking over more line for six weeks or two months: that the British troops had been seriously engaged since the spring and required rest, refitting and training: that taking over more line meant expenditure of labour, material and time in organizing the new sector: that he would like to know whether the French desired to take back the Coast Sector (handed over to the British on the 17th June 1917): also whether they expected

<sup>1</sup> There is no mention of the particular incident in Wilson's "Life". The book shows, however, that the general was frequently consulted by the Prime Minister at this time, and kept informed of the latter's views by other Ministers.

<sup>2</sup> Painlevé, p. 257.

<sup>3</sup> Three divisions, the 88th, 130th and 158th were broken up during Nov. and Dec. 1917, bringing the total number remaining down to 106, with 6 cavalry divisions, on the Western Front, and 8 divisions in the Orient. No further change took place except that in Nov. 1917, 6 divisions were sent to Italy and 2 cavalry divisions were reconverted as dismounted formations.

the British to relieve the French First Army (General Anthoine)<sup>1</sup> when the Passchendaele offensive was brought to a close : that there were—before it was certain that Russia would collapse entirely—great and obvious advantages in continuing the Passchendaele offensive in the spring, so as to exploit the strategical, moral and political results of forcing the enemy from the coastal area : that it was hoped the French force would continue to co-operate in this offensive, whilst subsidiary operations were carried out elsewhere : that if the French were prepared to make a big offensive effort, Sir Douglas Haig was willing to consider giving it precedence over his own plan.

General Pétain thereupon made it clear that he intended to withdraw General Anthoine's Army, but to take back the Coast Sector.<sup>2</sup> He handed to Sir Douglas Haig a paper in which two plans were outlined. First, should Russia make a separate peace, the Allied Armies were, at the commencement of the campaign, to preserve a defensive attitude : in this case there should be a rational distribution of the Allied forces proportionate to their effectives, and a common reserve should be concentrated in the theatre in which the German attack was likely to be made. Secondly, should Russia continue in the War, he proposed the adoption of a definitely offensive plan, in which the British, American, Belgian and French forces should make a co-ordinated

**Sketch B.** effort. As regards the French, he outlined a series of attacks with limited objectives near Moronvilliers (15 miles east of Reims), near Brimont (6 miles north of Reims), and thirdly in Woevre (in which the Americans should take part), designed to free the St. Mihiel Salient. After these there would follow the main operation in August—in which, no doubt, he intended American troops should play an important rôle—carried out to the north-east of Reims, with a distant objective, with a view to disengaging the town, followed by a pursuit northward. In co-operation with this, it was asked that the attack of the British Armies should be launched in the region of St. Quentin (the sector in which the British were asked to relieve the French), in the general direction of Bohain, that is north-eastwards. It was the old plan of 1915, of attacking the two shoulders

<sup>1</sup> This Army, consisting of the I. and XXXVI. Corps, had five divisions in the line and three in reserve. It was on the left of the Fifth Army.

<sup>2</sup> It was taken over again by the French XXXVI. Corps on 19th Nov., but later passed to the Belgian Army, the French corps remaining in reserve.

of the great German salient in France, the apex of which, owing to the German retirement in the spring, was now near Laon.

Sir Douglas Haig promised General Pétain to think over his proposals. In a considered reply which he sent next day the principal points made were the following: he regretted that he could not agree that the best use to make of the British forces was to extend them on a defensive line to the detriment of the offensive which they had proved their ability to carry out: the withdrawal of General Anthoine's Army would so much reduce his offensive power that to comply with the request to take over more front would practically mean the abandonment of any offensive: if he were right in understanding that the French main offensive would not be made until August, it seemed to him worthy of consideration whether the Allies could wait so long for a decision: whilst sympathetically realizing General Pétain's difficulties, and sharing his view as to the desirability of agreeing on a plan to be laid before their respective Governments, he could do no more than offer to send the four divisions then stationed in the Coast Sector, when the French should resume occupation of it, to prolong the British front to the south: this might be done towards the end of November, provided no extension of his front should be required whilst the British offensive in Flanders was being continued and no change should occur in the general situation such as might render the relief impossible. This letter General Pétain acknowledged on the 23rd October, insisting that the relief of his Sixth Army must precede the settling of the plan for next year.

Sir Douglas Haig forwarded a report of this conference to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, in which, after explaining his point of view, he pointed out that General Pétain seemed to have gone further than the Boulogne Conference warranted. He enquired whether the War Cabinet would support him in declining to take over more than a four-division front. He also asked to be informed as soon as possible whether the divisions in France would be brought up to establishment and so maintained in 1918, as he had urged, and whether he might expect to receive any divisions from any other theatres, pointing out that his arrangements for the winter and his plans for 1918 would be affected by the decisions given on these questions.

To this report Sir William Robertson replied on the 24th October by a private as well as an official letter, stating that

he had explained the Commander-in-Chief's views fully to the War Cabinet, and that the general military policy for 1918 was then under consideration and would form the subject of a conference with the Allied Governments, which, he hoped, would be held early in November.<sup>1</sup> Both he and the War Cabinet, the C.I.G.S. said, were agreed that until the policy was settled it would be premature to decide whether the front should be extended, and, if so, whether by four divisions or more: meanwhile the War Cabinet held that the proposed relief of the French must be considered in connection with the need for leave, rest and training, and with the plan of operations, when settled: but that, in any case, it could not be begun whilst the Flanders offensive was still in progress: as to a transfer of divisions from other theatres, he could give no useful reply for the moment: he had, however, advised the sending of all resources to France beyond those absolutely required for defence elsewhere: if this advice were accepted, he might be able to send three divisions to France, but it was unlikely this number would be exceeded: the question of drafts would be dealt with in a separate communication.

Here the question of extension of front will be left for the moment, although it continued to be very troublesome during the winter and will need further mention.

On the same day that Sir William Robertson despatched his letter admitting that the future military policy had not yet been settled by the War Cabinet, the enemy gave unmistakable evidence that he intended to have a voice in the matter.

On the 24th October a small German Army of six divisions, sent specially for the purpose<sup>2</sup> and commanded by General Otto von Below, in co-operation with the Austrians, broke the front of the Italian Second Army near Caporetto, by surprise. The troops on the flanks of this breach, threatened in rear, gave way, and a general retreat of the other Armies followed in which the Italians suffered such heavy loss in prisoners and territory that there seemed imminent danger of a complete collapse. In view of this serious situation, the French and British Governments decided to hurry troops to Italy from the Western Front, and on the 27th October Sir Douglas Haig was ordered to despatch two divisions. Next day he was warned that

<sup>1</sup> See page 30, the Rapallo Conference.

<sup>2</sup> The German general reserve consisted of 6 divisions. It had already in 1917 been used to break the Kerenski offensive and to capture Riga.

further help might be required. On the 7th November he was requested to send two more divisions, besides six batteries of heavy artillery and two squadrons of aeroplanes, and to arrange for General Sir Herbert Plumer (then commanding the Second Army engaged in the Passchendaele battle) to proceed to Italy forthwith, taking such members of his Staff as he might desire, to assume command of the British forces.<sup>1</sup>

Three days later the Field-Marshal was informed by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff that, as a result of a Conference of Allied Prime Ministers assembled at Rapallo,<sup>2</sup> it had been decided as essential to the Allied cause to give such direct assistance to the Italians as would enable their troops to stem the invasion and gain time and opportunity to recover and refit : he would therefore probably be required to send two more divisions in addition to the four already under orders, with a corresponding force of heavy artillery and aircraft : it was further not unlikely that he might be called on for two more, making eight in all : some or all of these, if exhausted by fighting, might have to be relieved during the winter by others from France : in view of this decision, he was asked to state his proposals for action on the Western Front.

Sir Douglas Haig had already, on the 31st October, represented that the despatch of any considerable force from France to Italy would necessitate a defensive attitude on the Western Front and result in the initiative passing to the enemy ; he had then—with the Cambrai offensive, still a secret guarded with the utmost care, in his mind—urged consideration of the alternative possibility of relieving pressure on the Italians by strengthening the offensive in France.<sup>3</sup> Now on the 15th November after stating that the

<sup>1</sup> General Plumer handed over the command of the Second Army to General Sir Henry Rawlinson (Fourth Army) at 6 p.m. on 9th Nov., but the attack arranged for the 10th, which brought the battle officially to a close, was carried out. General Rawlinson had been superintending the coastal operations which had just been definitely abandoned. On 14th Dec. the old Second Army was officially renamed the Fourth Army.

<sup>2</sup> See page 31.

<sup>3</sup> Sir D. Haig sent his C.G.S. to England to try and induce the War Cabinet to keep for the Cambrai offensive the last three divisions ordered to Italy. This he did on the grounds that it would give the Italians more effective help than they would obtain from the slow process of sending them to Italy. Actually, the Austrian offensive had petered out before a single British division was in the line. For political reasons, Italy's call for direct assistance could not be disregarded : indeed, it was feared that, like Russia, she might go out of the War.

It is of interest to note that when the Austrian Chief of the General Staff, Arz von Straussenberg, applied to Ludendorff for the assistance of

immediate effect of withdrawing divisions meant the discontinuance of the Flanders operation, he replied that, though he anticipated attacks by the enemy on the Western Front, in view of the lateness of the season and of the condition of the enemy's infantry, they were unlikely to be more than local efforts with limited objectives: the situation next year, however, gave cause for graver anxiety: under the new conditions, the British Army could maintain little activity during the winter, and any serious offensive in the spring would be impossible: it was not unlikely, therefore, that the Germans would seize the initiative: further, the maintenance of an Army in Italy and the probable extension of the front in France would very considerably reduce the capacity of the British Armies to meet and repulse a heavy attack, and the movements of reserves would be adversely affected by diversion of rolling stock to meet the needs of the Italian theatre.<sup>1</sup> He again urged that drafts should be sent out to his units; otherwise the number of divisions in France would have to be adjusted to such man-power as was available to replace wastage.

The movement of troops to Italy was so slow in consequence of railway difficulties that it took many weeks to effect their transfer. Meantime, the situation in that theatre became stabilized on the Piave, and in the end only five British and six French divisions in all were sent, with a suitable proportion of heavy guns, aeroplanes and other material. The last of the British divisions for Italy left on the 10th-12th December. The total of eleven withdrawn, however, made an important reduction in the strength of the small Allied reserves, already barely adequate to meet emergencies on the Western Front.

Whilst the above events were in progress, Sir Douglas

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eight divisions in the Caporetto offensive, the latter replied that, in view of the Flanders battle in progress, it was scarcely possible to detach so many ("Der Durchbruch am Isonzo" ii., p. 18), and he provided six. In his book, "My War Memories" (English translation), he says (p. 491), that, owing to the heavy casualties in Flanders in mid-October he was compelled to divert to France two divisions on their way from the Eastern Front to Italy. On page 581 he mentions that another division which it was desired to send from France to the Trentino could not be spared. And on page 496 he asks what would have been the judgment on the Italian campaign if the initial success of the British at Cambrai on 20th Nov. had been exploited.

<sup>1</sup> The Italian railways were very short of rolling stock, and this increased the strain thrown on the already heavily burdened French railways when large bodies of troops had to be moved to Italy and maintained there. The present and future requirements of the American Army had also to be borne in mind.

Haig experienced another unpleasant surprise, which threatened to reduce his Armies even more seriously. A War Office letter of the 3rd November<sup>1</sup> informed him that the total number of reinforcements which could be available for the Western Front in 1918, after providing for other theatres of war and for other employment, would, according to official calculations, fall so far short of his probable requirements, that his present deficiency of 75,000 infantrymen would rise to 259,000 by the 31st October 1918.<sup>2</sup> From an examination made at G.H.Q. of the figures put forward by the War Office, it appeared that the situation in 1918 might prove even worse than anticipated in London. Wastage is, as a rule, proportionately higher in a numerically weak force struggling to carry out a great task than in a strong force fully adequate to do what is required of it. Neither this factor nor the matter of the losses in Italy—which would partly affect the Army in France, since divisions exhausted in the former theatre were to be relieved from the latter—seemed to have been taken into account. Moreover, it was thought at G.H.Q. that the fighting in 1918 might be more severe than foreseen in the War Office calculation. Allowing for these factors and possibilities, it was estimated, on the figures supplied, that the shortage in the infantry on the Western Front might amount to 250,000 men by the 31st March, and to 460,000 by the 31st October. It had also to be taken into account that in every unit and formation a more or less fixed number of men must be employed on administrative duties, the performance of which is essential whether the strength of the unit is up to establishment or below it; thus fighting efficiency is lost by casualties in a higher proportion than the actual ratio of strength to establishment. It was therefore the view at G.H.Q. that, unless the prospect as regards reinforcements could be very considerably improved, it would be necessary to break up many infantry units and carry out a drastic reorganization of the Army in order to reduce the divisions to a number which could be maintained at their establishment. Such a change could not, however, be commenced without some danger in the face of an enemy who might very soon regain the initiative with a large accession of strength; rest, training, work on defences would be interfered with, and the energies of commanders and staffs diverted from preparations for future operations.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 3.

<sup>2</sup> The question of drafts and man-power is dealt with in the next chapter.

On the 24th November Sir Douglas Haig communicated his calculations to the War Office,<sup>1</sup> adding that unless more men could be made available for drafts it would become necessary to break up fifteen divisions in France in order to bring the remainder up to establishment by the spring. Whatever reorganization might become necessary, he said he was "strongly opposed to any drastic alteration or "reduction in the composition or organization of a division, "as it would undoubtedly create considerable dislocation "throughout the Army both tactically and administratively. "Moreover, any reduction in the present establishment "would be extravagant in so far as staffs are concerned, "and the question of finding commanders and staffs is "becoming increasingly difficult. . . . The retention of our "existing organization, combined with the maintenance of "units up to establishment, will prove to be the truest form "of economy in regard to man-power."

On the 4th December the Field-Marshal was informed that it was hoped a decision as to the number of men to be made available for military purposes would very shortly be given by the War Cabinet. He was instructed to take no steps towards the reduction of any divisions in France during the next fortnight, unless he considered it essential to the successful conduct of operations, in which case he should submit his proposals.

The Chief of the Imperial General Staff had throughout given his support to the views of the Commander-in-Chief. A year earlier, in November 1916, in co-operation with his military colleagues on the Army Council, at the request of Mr. Lloyd George, then Secretary of State for War, he had submitted an important memorandum on the man-power question. As the constitutional adviser of the War Cabinet on military plans, he had consistently and strongly urged the concentration of resources on the Western Front to the utmost extent possible with due regard to the security of vital points elsewhere. He had specially emphasized this in forwarding Sir Douglas Haig's paper of the 8th October. On the 19th November, replying to a question from the War Cabinet asking whether the wiser course for the Allies would be to aim at winning the War in 1918, or to make plans to postpone a decision in that year with a view to forcing one at a later period when America should have developed her forces, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff stated that there were two principal possibilities :

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 4.

first, Russia might rally sufficiently to hold the enemy's force on her front, and Italy might recover and reorganize ; or, secondly, Russia might make a separate peace, the enemy might move large forces to the West, and the Allies might be obliged to give Italy enough help to enable her to hold the enemy on her front.

In the first case, he considered that a strong effort to force a decision in the spring would be justifiable ; in either case, he held that the proper course to follow was to be as strong as possible on the Western Front, reducing commitments elsewhere to the lowest possible figures : action on these lines should be taken at once : the final decision as to the plan of campaign should be held over until the situation was clearer, when, having meanwhile done everything possible to concentrate all available forces in readiness, they would have them at hand to deal with either of the two main cases or any variation of them which might arise. "We may", he argued, "prefer to avoid seeking a "decision in 1918, but the enemy may—and we must "assume that he will—try to force a decision upon us at "a time and place most favourable to himself. For "example, it is clear that if it would pay us to wait for the "Americans and defer our main effort until 1919, it would "equally well pay the enemy to deprive us of the oppor- "tunity, and try and get a decision in 1918. He would, "if the Entente were visibly on the defensive, be able to "deal with us as and where he wished ; our Armies would "deteriorate in efficiency ; and the spirit of the Nations, "not excluding our own, would suffer. . . . I can conceive "no decision which is likely to prove more dangerous from "a military standpoint, or more ruinous to the Entente "cause in general, than for us to commit ourselves irre- "trievably to the defensive for the next eighteen months, "and to neglect to make adequate preparations for attack if "and when required and in the greatest possible strength."

At this stage of the discussion the consideration of future military policy was placed on a new basis by the inauguration of a Supreme War Council.

Two months earlier, on the 14th October, during a visit to London of M. Franklin-Bouillon<sup>1</sup> and General Foch, on behalf of the French Government to press the case for the British taking over more of the line, Mr. Lloyd George had

<sup>1</sup> A Minister without portfolio, who had been Chairman of the Committee of the Senate on foreign affairs.

raised the question of the desirability of establishing "a permanent staff of military officers" to study the War as a whole, instead of from the point of view of one particular army, and advise the Allied Governments as to the strategy to be adopted. This entirely suited French views, and on the 30th October, when M. Painlevé again visited London in connection with the assistance to be given to Italy, the question of a Supreme War Council was again debated between him and Mr. Lloyd George. They were completely in accord, except as regards the military representatives.<sup>1</sup> The British Prime Minister wished to nominate General Wilson,<sup>2</sup> General Robertson remaining Chief of the Imperial General Staff. He insisted, therefore, that no member of the future Allied Staff should at the same time be Chief of the General Staff of his own country. In particular, he considered that General Foch, in order to carry out the duties of Allied Chief of the Staff, should be superseded in his position as Chief of the Staff of the French Army. Mr. Lloyd George also objected to Paris as the seat of the future Allied Staff, and desired a town, like Boulogne, near the British front. As a compromise, Versailles was accepted by both parties. At the same meeting the outlines of three other branches of the Supreme War Council, in addition to the Allied General Staff, were sketched out. These were a naval committee, to sit in London, and a diplomatic committee and an economic and financial committee, both to sit in Versailles.

It now remained to submit the proposals for a Supreme War Council and an Allied Staff to Italy and the United States of America. As circumstances did not permit of members of the Italian Government coming to Paris, and Generals Foch and Robertson had already proceeded to Rome, it was arranged that a conference should be held in Italy, at Rapallo, not very far from the French frontier, nominally to discuss the military assistance to be given to Italy. To this place, Mr. Lloyd George and General Smuts, accompanied unofficially by General Wilson, and M. Painlevé and M. Franklin-Bouillon, travelled on the 3rd November,<sup>3</sup> and there was a preliminary meeting between

<sup>1</sup> Painlevé, pp. 260-1. The matter was further discussed in Paris, on the way to Rapallo, and at Rapallo.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Lloyd George informed Sir Henry Wilson on 31st Oct. that it had been decided to set up a "Supreme War Council", and that he was to be the British military member. Wilson, ii. p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> On this day Sir William Robertson telegraphed from Rome that the French had made a proposal for General Pétain to take over command of

the representatives of the French and British Governments on the evening of the 4th to settle on a plan of action. At the first session of the Conference on the 5th, Italy was represented by Baron Sonnino, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and General Alfieri, Minister for War, with General Porro, the Chief of the Staff, in attendance. An opening for the discussion of a co-ordinating council almost at once offered itself. In a description of the situation, on which a demand for fifteen more Allied divisions was based, General Porro asserted that 317 Italian battalions were faced, or soon would be, by 811 Austro-German, nine German divisions having taken part in the original attack and twelve to fifteen more having subsequently left the Western Front for Italy. Both General Foch and General Robertson pointed out the unlikelihood of such a concentration, the latter stating on the authority of the D.M.I. Major-General Sir G. M. W. Macdonogh, correctly as is now known, that only six German divisions were on the Italian front. They considered that eight French and British divisions would be sufficient assistance. Such divergence of opinion on matters of fact gave good reason for seeking an authoritative ruling by some co-ordinating body which had power to ensure effective unity. M. Painlevé therefore put forward the proposal already formulated in London, and at the fifth session the creation of a Superior (subsequently changed to Supreme) War Council was agreed on by the representatives of the three Powers. It was to meet at least once a month, normally at Versailles, but elsewhere if found necessary. It was to be assisted by a body of "Permanent Military Representatives", one from each Power, as technical military advisers without executive functions. Assisted by such staffs as might be required, these military representatives were to have their headquarters at Versailles. The object in view, as explained by the Prime Minister in the House of Commons on the 14th November, was "to set up a central body charged "with the duty of continuously surveying the field of "operations as a whole, and, by the light of information "derived from all fronts and from all Governments and "Staffs, of co-ordinating the plans prepared by the different "General Staffs, and, if necessary, of making proposals of

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the Italian front, retaining the right half of the French Army, and that Sir Douglas Haig should take over command from Verdun westwards. The idea found no favour and was at once dropped.

"their own for the better conduct of the war". Thus the Supreme War Council was to be and for a time became the deciding authority on military policy and the strategic distribution of the Allied forces between the various theatres of war.

Agreement having been arrived at, the fifth session of the Conference, on the 7th November, was converted into the first session of the Supreme War Council, and the "Permanent Military Representatives" were then and there appointed. General Foch was nominated for France; but, in view of Mr. Lloyd George's persistent objection to his being at the same time French Chief of the Staff, General Weygand, who had been Foch's senior staff officer since September 1914 and had not held a command, was nominated to take his place at Versailles. The Italian Army was represented by General Cadorna, recently superseded in the Supreme Command by General Diaz; and the British Army by Sir Henry Wilson, who could not be said to be in sympathy either with Sir Douglas Haig or the C.I.G.S.

As their first task, the Military Representatives were instructed to "report immediately on the present situation "on the Italian Front. In consultation with the Italian "G.H.Q. they should examine into the present state of "affairs, and, on a general review of the military situation "in all theatres, should advise as to the amount and "nature of assistance to be given by the British and French "Governments, and as to the manner in which it should be "applied."<sup>1</sup>

The Supreme War Council held its second session at Versailles, assembling on the 1st December. On this occasion America was represented by Colonel E. M. House, the President's special agent, with General T. H. Bliss, an officer senior to General Pershing, as Permanent Military

<sup>1</sup> The Military Representatives with their staffs numbered when assembled, without counting clerks, 48 officers. The British Section of the office was organized into three sub-sections A (Allies), E (Enemy) and M (Man-Power and Material), corresponding to the General Staff Branches, Operations and Intelligence, and A. and Q. Branches of a headquarters staff, with a Political Branch under Lieut.-Colonel L. S. Amery. One of General Wilson's methods of presenting his case was to get up a discussion, which he called a "War Game", in which the "E" sub-section would develop the enemy plan which had been evolved, and "A" would then argue how best to meet it. The general would then sum up. Games of this kind, exhibiting the supposed German plan, were performed before Mr. Lloyd George, Lord Milner, General Smuts, Sir Douglas Haig, and others.

Representative.<sup>1</sup> The French Premier, M. Clemenceau,<sup>2</sup> in opening the proceedings, said that the first duty of the Council was to examine the nature of the military operations to be undertaken in 1918—an important matter still undecided. With that object, he suggested that the Military Representatives, who were present, should be directed to study the general situation in detail, and advise as to these operations, and that their attention should be drawn to certain changes in the situation. These he proceeded to enunciate, simultaneously raising the question of their significance. The gist of his remarks was as follows:

First, it should be assumed that Russia would not be in a position to give the Allies any effective support. What enemy effectives would this set free?

Secondly, after serious reverses which nearly amounted to disaster, the Italian Front had again been stabilized. Important British and French forces were now on it. This weakened the Franco-British Front considerably both for the offensive and the defensive. Did this indicate an Allied offensive on the Italian Front?

Thirdly, the forces of the United States of America were progressively developing on the Western Front. What numbers could be expected at different periods in 1918? This must depend largely on the tonnage available to transport them: the Military Representatives should closely study this question, including the reconstitution of the mercantile marine, taking into account the ships which would be gained by reducing dependence on imports and stimulating national production, and by new construction, not forgetting that new ships would require crews and the man-power available for the Armies might be thereby reduced. Tonnage affected operations and conversely operations affected tonnage by absorbing freight, and must therefore exert some influence on the rate of arrival of American troops.

Fourthly, in connection with the last-named fact, the struggle had become a war of exhaustion: it was possible

<sup>1</sup> General Bliss, a graduate of West Point and an artillery officer, had been appointed Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army in 1917, after being Assistant Chief, but replaced at the end of the year, having reached the age limit, by General P. C. March. He had been twice President of the Army War College, and had occupied many posts of importance, including command in the Philippines. He was a big man both physically and intellectually—a burly six-footer—with an army reputation for wide interests, profound scholarship and sound judgment. He died on 9th Nov. 1930.

<sup>2</sup> He had replaced M. Painlevé as Prime Minister and Minister of War on 16th Nov. 1917.

that victory might be won by power of endurance rather than by a military decision : certainly Russia had collapsed, but, on the other side, neither Turkey nor Austria was far from collapse : the possibility of isolating Germany by the destruction of her Allies should be considered as a preliminary step to concentrating all forces, including those of America, against her as the final effort of the War.

At the outset of this speech—which introduced, as if new and solemn subjects for consideration, both high strategy and details of shipping tonnage, although these and many others had been vexing the British and French General Staffs for many months and urgently required decision, not discussion—M. Clemenceau explained that the substance of his remarks had already been agreed upon with Mr. Lloyd George, who was present. The nature of the views expressed may therefore be taken as representing the attitude of the French and British Governments at the time towards future military policy, and their desire to evade the acceptance of the advice offered by the responsible British military authorities, the Chief of the Imperial General Staff and the Commander-in-Chief of the British Armies in France.

The Council then proceeded to discuss lesser matters, such as the situation in Macedonia and Greece, a reorganization of the Belgian Army (from six divisions of eighteen battalions into nine of twelve), and an offensive in Italy, for which Signor Orlando estimated that a reinforcement of twenty divisions was required. The paucity of railway resources stood in the way of such a movement, and it was agreed to appoint a railway expert to examine generally the question of inter-Allied transportation, with a view to facilitating the transfer of troops from one theatre to another, especially between France and Italy. Finally, the Military Representatives were instructed to examine the whole military situation and report their recommendations as to future plans of operations.

A summary of the principal factors in the Allied situation at the beginning of December, when the above task was set, will serve to bring this chapter to a close. The Passchendaele offensive had been brought to an end on the 10th November. The Battle of Cambrai had closed with a counter-attack (30th November-3rd December), which brought home to many soldiers that the German Army was by no means “dead” as some people fondly imagined ; as the Third Army had very few reserves available—these

except for two divisions had been sent to Italy—this counter-attack enabled the enemy to recover part of the ground lost in the British offensive and capture some of the original British line. The Battle of Malmaison (23rd October-1st November) and the minor operations near Verdun, which continued into the middle of December, showed that the French Army had, under General Pétain, somewhat recovered its discipline and fighting spirit. In Italy, the Austro-German forces had reached the Piave, and their front had become stabilized on the Piave—Asiago line ; at Salonika there had been since the Battle of the Vardar (Doiran and the Cerna Bend) in May a practical cessation of hostilities ; in Palestine the Third Battle of Gaza had been fought (27th October-7th November) and Sir Edmund Allenby was approaching Jerusalem, which was captured on the 9th December ; in Mesopotamia, General Sir Stanley Maude had died in Baghdad on the 18th November and had been succeeded by Sir William Marshall, and hostilities were practically at an end. The prospect of obtaining any further assistance from Russia had grown steadily worse during the autumn ; on the 8th November the Bolsheviks had gained possession of Petrograd, and on the 21st Lenin's Government had asked for an armistice ; on the 27th the first meeting of the Russian and German delegates had taken place, and on the 3rd December hostilities between the Armies of the Central Powers and Russia had been suspended, followed immediately by a similar state of affairs in Rumania. A transfer of enemy forces from the Eastern Front, on a large scale, had therefore become practically certain ; indeed Intelligence reports indicated that it had already begun—in reality it had been in progress since the 1st November.<sup>1</sup>

By the 1st December the number of American troops in France had reached a total of 130,000, comprising four divisions, the 1st (Regular), the 2nd (Regular and Marines), the 26th (New England National Guard), and the 42nd ("Rainbow", National Guard units of every State), with an administrative personnel engaged in making preparations to receive the fighting troops which were to follow. The 1st Division was in the line in the Nancy sector, the others were training in back areas. It had been settled that the preliminary

<sup>1</sup> Kuhl, p. 6. Gehre's diagram shows an increase in the German reserves in the West in November from 7 divisions to 18 divisions, and on the Eastern Front a decrease of 6 (2 from Russia, 4 from the Balkans). By the end of December the increase on the Western Front had grown to 33 divisions.

training of other divisions, in which special attention was to be given to musketry and open warfare, was to be carried out in America. A further course of three months' duration was to be carried out in France, in which the offensive was to be the basis of the instruction. It was the wish of his Government, so General Pershing had made clear, that his forces should be kept together and employed as a whole, offensively, when—and not before—they should be large enough and fit in all respects to exercise a really powerful influence. The French ports placed at the disposal of the American Army were, chiefly, those on the Atlantic coast, St. Nazaire, La Pallice (La Rochelle) and Bassens (Bordeaux) being designated for permanent use, and Nantes, Bordeaux and Pauillac (below Bordeaux) for emergency use, several smaller ports being available for importation of coal from England; only from time to time were trans-Atlantic ships sent to Havre and Cherbourg. From the position of the main bases and the direction of the railway systems running from them, General Pershing considered that the most convenient area in which to employ the American troops, when ready to go into action, would be "to the north-east", that is, in the French sector, for the railways available ran towards Belfort, Epinal, Chaumont and Troyes. The British therefore would not receive much assistance from the new Allies, nor could the weight of the Americans be felt anywhere for many months.

To Sir Douglas Haig it seemed that there was no prospect of any of the conditions being fulfilled which he had specified in his memorandum of the 8th October as necessary to enable his Armies to take the offensive in the spring. Nor could he hope, even if his forces were unexpectedly strengthened, that either the French or the Americans would be able to co-operate effectively in such an operation. No decision had been conveyed to him regarding the allocation of British man-power, which had been referred to a Cabinet Committee. The general question of future military policy, on which the strength and plans of the Allied Armies in each theatre of war were to be based, was still unanswered. Until the Permanent Military Representatives had completed their studies and submitted their advice, and the Supreme War Council had had time to consider these views, as well as those of their responsible military authorities, there was no prospect of a decision being reached. So far as could be judged from the opinion expressed at the second session of the Supreme

War Council, there seemed no probability of any divisions being transferred from the minor theatres to the Western Front, no likelihood of any of the British and French troops in Italy being brought back to France, and the question of the extension of the British front remained unsettled.

The Field-Marshal therefore came to the conclusion that whatever decision on military policy the Allied Governments might eventually adopt, the initiative in the spring on the Western Front could not be denied to the enemy, if, as seemed almost certain, he should determine to seize it : the British Armies in France were consequently driven to adopt a defensive rôle, and it was necessary to begin preparations to this end as soon as possible.

On the 3rd December, the day on which the campaign of 1917 ended with the termination of the Battle of Cambrai, Sir Douglas Haig accordingly assembled his Army commanders, and informed them that "the general situation "on the Russian and Italian fronts, combined with the "paucity of reinforcements which we are likely to receive, "will in all probability necessitate our adopting a defensive "attitude for the next few months. We must be prepared "to meet a strong and sustained hostile offensive. It is "therefore of first importance that Army commanders "should give their immediate and personal attention to "the organization of the zones for defensive purposes and "to the rest and training of their troops".

At the same time preliminary instructions on the principles to be observed in the preparation for, and in the conduct of, defensive operations were issued, and the Army commanders, Generals Sir Henry Horne, Sir Julian Byng, Sir Henry Rawlinson and Sir Hubert Gough, were requested to submit to G.H.Q. any remarks or suggestions which they might desire to offer on the subject.

## CHAPTER II

### DEFENSIVE PREPARATIONS AND THE OBSTACLES IN THEIR WAY

G.H.Q. Instructions—State of the Defences—Extension of the Front—Shortage of Drafts—Reduction of the Strength of Divisions.

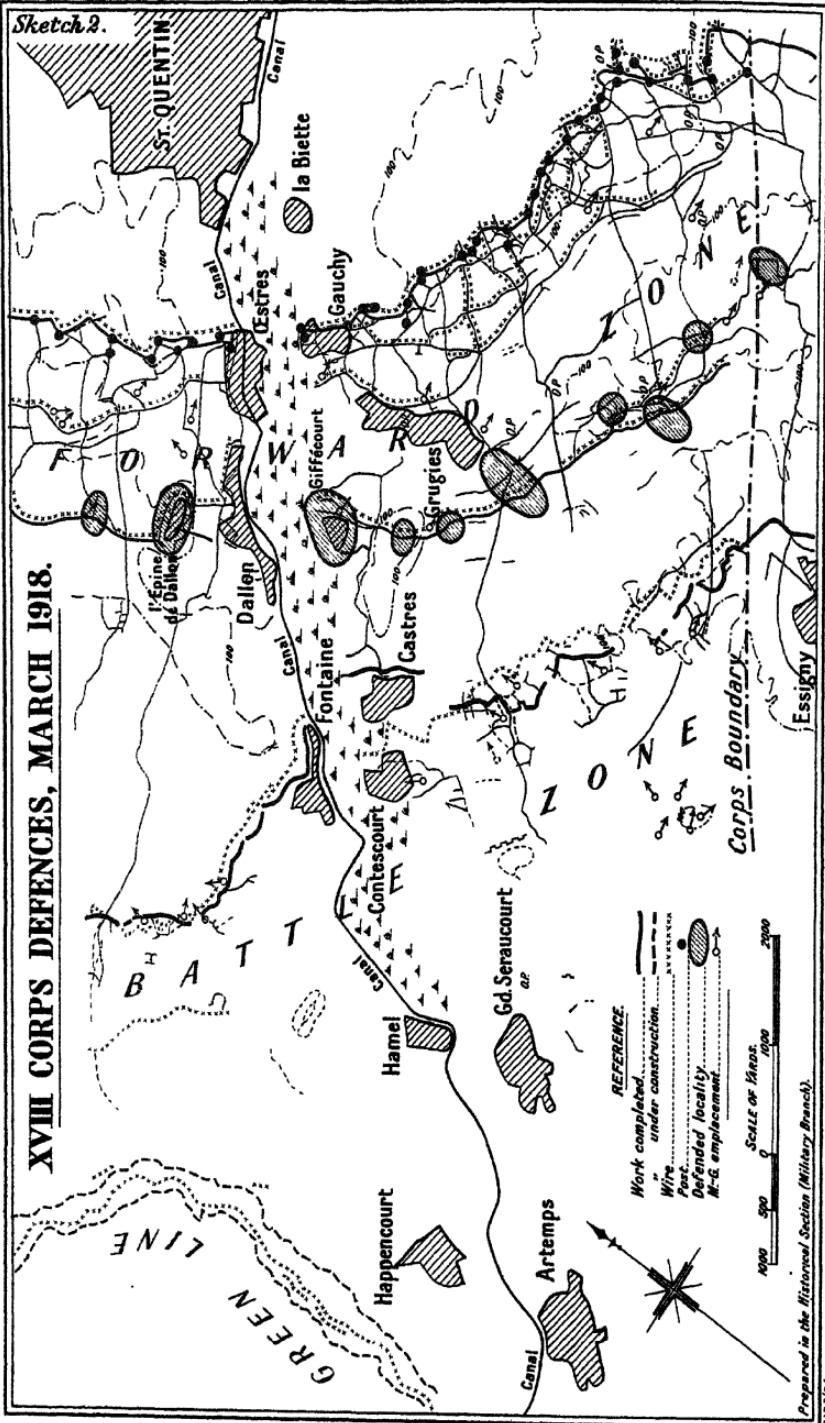
(Map 1 ; Sketches A, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, B)

THERE was much to be done before the British front could be considered adequately prepared to meet a serious enemy offensive. During the previous two years and more all the thoughts and energies of the British Armies in France had been concentrated on attack, and, in consequence, defensive arrangements had to some extent been neglected. Troops and labour had been massed on the offensive fronts, whereas the garrisons on the rest of the line had been reduced to the strength necessary to deal with local operations. Since these were unlikely to be of an important character as long as a British offensive was being seriously pressed elsewhere, the garrisons had been usually too weak in numbers to do more than keep in repair those defences which were actually in occupation. On the offensive fronts, the entrenchments, thrown up hurriedly, or adapted from the enemy lines as the troops gained ground under fire, were necessarily of an elementary nature and rarely sited to the best advantage ; as a rule, they marked the high-water mark of an advance, not the best tactical position. The gun emplacements on such fronts were extemporized ; the wire was slight ; there were no deep dug-outs ; and no deeply buried signal systems. Little, if any, labour had been available for the upkeep of such “back lines” as had been developed in the earlier years as insurance against a set-back, and they had fallen into decay. There had seemed little reason for their upkeep ; because if the initiative could be retained, as the Commander-in-Chief hoped, there was little chance



Sketch 2.

## XVIII CORPS DEFENCES, MARCH 1918.



of their ever being of service. The French in the autumn of 1917 had actually begun to fill in and clear away some of the back lines in the British area in order to restore the land to cultivation. Thus the defences generally—and the communication trenches in rear of them—were very far from being adequate, either in lay-out, strength or depth, to resist an attack on a great scale aiming at a decisive success.

Nor were the British troops trained to meet such an attack. Of hard fighting all, except recently joined drafts, had gained considerable experience, and under the most desperate conditions they had given proof of bravery, endurance and determination unsurpassed. But the men who had fought the defensive battles of 1914–15 had mostly disappeared, and the instruction and training of officers and other ranks of the New Army had been severely limited. The short time available had necessarily been devoted to preparations for the special type of offensive operations on which the Armies had been employed. The military education and experience of the Army of 1917 had in consequence been one-sided, and its skill in musketry, in particular, was below a reasonable standard. Training in defence, as well as the material preparations which defence involved, was therefore urgently required. Rest, including such leave to England as could be given, was hardly of less importance.<sup>1</sup> Training in the conduct of retreat, and of a retreat extending over many days, never entered any-one's mind.

To combine training and rest with the large amount of work necessary on defences, in addition to providing for the constant security of the front, was a problem difficult

<sup>1</sup> The Commander-in-Chief wrote to the War Office on 12th Dec. 1917 that leave "is a matter of urgent necessity for the men. They have earned it, and it is a valuable means of keeping them in good heart. At present "they get, at most, 14 days' leave [only on 1st Nov. had the period been "raised from 10 to 14 days] during a period of 15 months, and they are "well aware that the French soldiers get very much more." He gave a table which showed that in the Armies and Cavalry Corps, that is, the fighting troops, there were 3,990 men who had had no leave for 18 months; 18,800 who had had none for 15 months, and 89,304 who had had none for 12 months; for the whole force the totals, including L. of C., were 4,927, 24,028 and 115,761. An average of 5,500 officers and men were going on leave each day. On 15th Jan. 1918 the C.I.G.S. informed the War Cabinet that "at present about 350,000 French soldiers are on leave, as against "80,000 British. . . . The French soldier gets leave every four months." Six months earlier, in July 1917, only 3,000 British soldiers were being sent daily, and about 50,000 men were on leave at one time, so some improvement had taken place: the difficulty lay in the provision of cross-Channel transport when the Navy required the services of so many light craft.

of solution. The time available was likely to be short ; since if the enemy decided to attack it was manifestly in his interest to do so as soon as possible, before many American divisions could take the field. The labour available from sources outside the fighting troops was very limited,<sup>1</sup> and the Armies were below establishment ; yet, as almost any part of the front might be attacked, nearly the whole of it ought to be prepared.

The state of the Army was admirably summed up by General Smuts in a memorandum prepared for the War Cabinet, which he wrote after a six days' visit to the Western Front undertaken, at the request of the Prime Minister, at the end of January :—

I am satisfied that the morale of the Army is good. The bearing of the troops coming in and out of the line and in the large working parties all along the front is in every way satisfactory. The Army is well found and in good fettle. There is no question, however, that the men are tired. This applies more especially to the infantry. To a considerable extent the personnel of the artillery has been rested after the great fatigues of the Flanders battle. The infantry, on the other hand, is not yet sufficiently rested. All the divisions were actively engaged in exhausting offensive operations during the whole of 1917. Much new ground has been wrested from the enemy, with the result that entirely new defences have had to be created on a large proportion of the front, and the tired divisions had not during 1917 maintained even the old defences at the highest level. The change in the strategical situation, due to the collapse of Russia, has necessitated the construction of a great new system of defences in depth, the fronts of which, on most parts of the front, do not correspond with the first line trenches. A defensive system that amply sufficed for an Army continuously on the offensive, does not meet the defensive needs of the existing situation, and behind the elaborate system of the main battle zone, reserve defences are being constructed.

The preparation of this vast but absolutely essential scheme of defence, requires an immense amount of labour. As the greater part of the work has to be done within the zone of artillery fire, native and prisoner labour cannot be employed to any considerable extent. The burden falls in the main on the infantry. Consequently, divisions which have completed their term in the defensive line have, almost immediately, to be turned on to the construction of defence works. The result is that they suffer in regard both to rest and training. In the circumstances, the surprising feature is not that they are fatigued but that their spirits are so good.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 5.



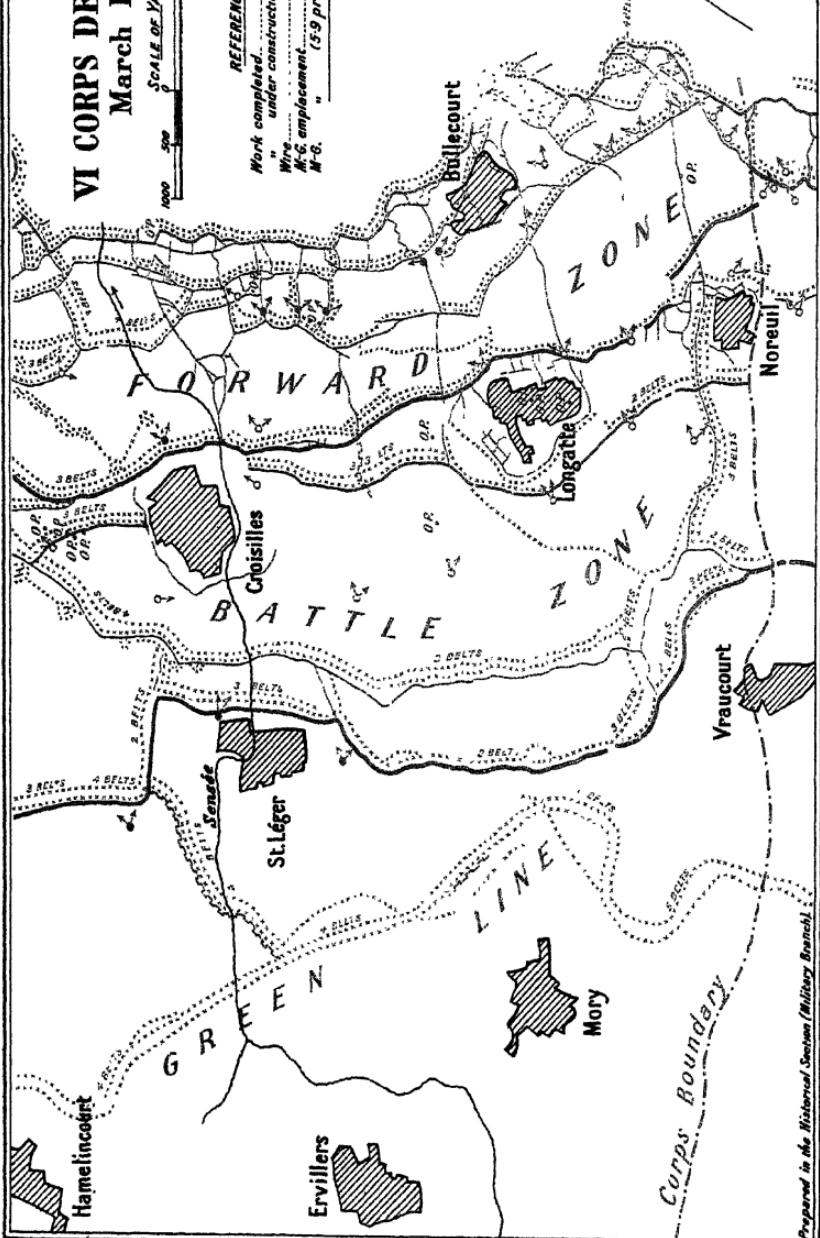
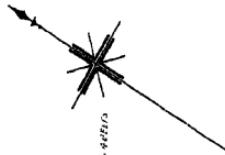
Sketch 3.

# VI CORPS DEFENCES, March 1918.

SCALE OF YARDS.  
1000  
500  
250

## REFERENCE.

- Work completed.
- " under construction.
- Wire
- M.G. emplacement
- M.G. " (5.9 proof)
- M.G. "



In addition, it must be borne in mind that the infantry are 100,000 men below strength until the new organization<sup>1</sup> has been completed.

Although it is impossible to ensure that the enemy will not break into any defences, however good, as we ourselves have proved, I am satisfied that in six weeks' time the defences, already strong, will be such as to enable the Army to render a good account of itself against any attack that can be brought to bear. The War Office should hasten the supply of barbed wire, as existing stocks are depleted.

The point, however, to which I wish to draw attention is that this need of rest is a psychological factor of the utmost importance in relation to the question of the extension of the line for which the French are pressing. It is my deliberate opinion, as the result of a most careful study of the question, that, if the Army is compelled at the present time to take over any further portion of the line beyond that already agreed to, and nearly completed, we shall be running serious risks. We shall be straining the Army too far. Either the defences will not be completed in time, or the essential rest will not be obtained, and the Army will not be in the state in which it ought to be to resist an attack. Moreover, any further extension of the front will cause great discontent among all ranks.

Instructions on the measures to be taken for organizing Sketches the defences were issued from G.H.Q. on the 14th December<sup>2</sup> and 3, after the suggestions of the Army commanders had been received and considered.<sup>3</sup> Three zones of defence, the "Forward Zone," the "Battle Zone" and the "Rear Zone", were to be prepared,<sup>4</sup> each organized in depth, that is, comprising several successive lines—either continuous trenches, or groups of trenches—strongpoints and machine-gun emplacements, with switches connecting the principal lines.

The "Forward Zone"<sup>4</sup> was to coincide generally with

<sup>1</sup> That is the reduction of infantry brigades from 4 to 3 battalions as described later in this chapter.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 6. The S.S. pamphlet "The Division in Defence" was not issued until May 1918.

<sup>3</sup> Sketches 2 and 3, in which "Rear Zone" is represented by no more than the "Green Line". The system was only a development of the existing state of things. There had always been a front system, with, as time went on, a "Corps Line" and an "Army Line" behind it; but these latter had little, if any, depth.

<sup>4</sup> The general organization of the defence was adapted from the Germans, as laid down in the manual, "Allgemeines über Stellenbau", issued by the Chief of the General Staff of the Field Armies on 15th Aug. 1917. This book, copies of which were captured soon after issue, summed up the enemy's experiences after nearly three years' defensive warfare on the Western Front; it was evidently well worth consideration if there

the existing front system, duly strengthened. The rôle allotted to the troops holding it was to "do all in their power to maintain their ground against every attack". "The backbone" of its defence was to be machine guns; but it was to be sufficiently garrisoned and strengthened to guard against surprise and compel the enemy to employ strong forces for its capture. The local reserves were to counter-attack if the enemy succeeded in penetrating.

The "Battle Zone" was to be elaborated on the best ground available for fighting behind the Forward Zone. The distance between these two defensive belts, when the instructions had been applied, actually varied with the ground from some six hundred yards, at a few points, to as much as three miles in others, but was usually a mile to two miles. The Battle Zone, which was to be at least 2,000–3,000 yards in depth, was intended to repulse, if possible, whatever attack the enemy might make. If the enemy penetrated, and the immediate attacks of local reserves did not succeed in expelling him, a deliberate counter-attack by the corps or Army reserve was to be launched at the first possible moment.

The "Rear Zone", on which the defence could fall back if necessary or advisable, was to be four to eight miles behind the Battle Zone, a second position, in fact. In view of the shortage of labour, however, the Rear Zone was in the first place only to be reconnoitred, later marked out and, if possible, wired. It was to be constructed as opportunity offered.

**Sketch 4.** Special instructions were given as regards the two great salients of the line—at Flesquières (opposite Cambrai) and Passchendaele (Ypres)—which might be cut off by conver-

was time to put its principles into effect. The small committee of three officers who drew up the first draft of the instructions suggested that there should be an "Outpost Line" and "Line of Resistance", the latter being the one—it might in some places coincide with the outpost line—on which the battle was to be fought out. The existing Army Lines and G.H.Q. Lines in rear could be developed as time allowed. This nomenclature was not approved, but in the first instructions issued to the troops, "Outpost Zone" was used; this on 3rd Jan. 1918 was corrected to "Forward Zone", on the grounds that the word "Outpost" might lead the advanced troops to fall back without serious resistance. Throughout March and April, however, the fighting troops continued to call the various lines by the names to which they had been accustomed: "Front", "Support", "Reserve", "Army", "Red", "Green", "Purple", etc.

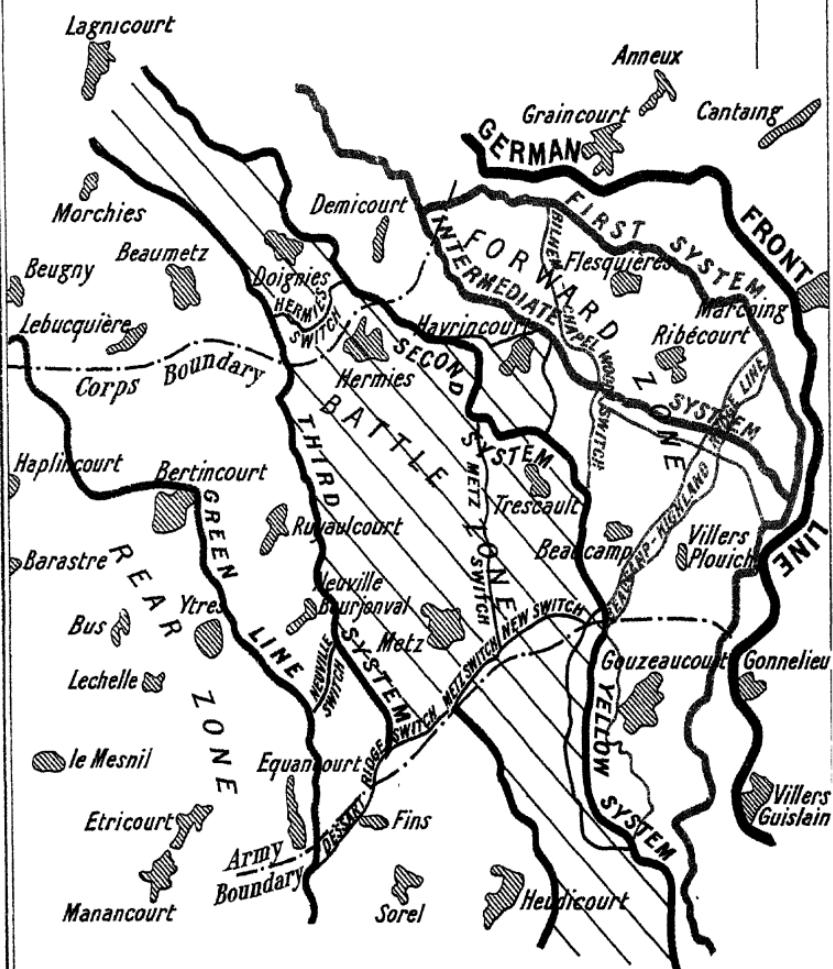
During 1918 the abandonment of the "Outpost Zone" became the deliberate and very successful policy of some of the French Armies, as British divisions learnt when they served under General Gouraud in May. See f.n. page 48.



*Sketch 4.*

## THE FLESQUIÈRES SALIENT

March 1918.



SCALE OF YARDS.  
1000 500 0 1000 2000 3000 4000 5000 6000 7000 8000 9000 10000

Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch).

gent attacks. Here it was decided that the front of the Battle Zone should be approximately the base of the salient, leaving all in front of it in the Forward Zone.

Having ordered the preparation of his front to be taken in hand at once on these lines, Sir Douglas Haig paid a visit to the French Commander-in-Chief at his G.Q.G. at Compiègne, on the 17th December, to concert with him the measures to be taken to ensure close co-operation between the two Allied Armies in defeating the expected attack. At this meeting the Field-Marshal explained to General Pétain the work which he was having done on the British front, and handed to him a copy of the Instructions which had been issued.

The two Commanders-in-Chief found themselves in complete agreement on the measures to be taken, particularly as to the need for increasing reserves and for ensuring close co-operation.<sup>1</sup> They arranged that their staffs should frequently meet in order to secure co-ordination of plans. They discussed also the methods which the enemy might adopt in the conduct of his offensive, and were of one mind that he was likely to begin operations by serious and simultaneous attacks on both the French and British fronts, with the aim of pinning down and using up the Allied reserves : these preliminary attacks would be followed up by a decisive thrust wherever he might consider that the situation had developed most favourably for his purpose.

The preparations on the British front were pushed on throughout the winter as rapidly as labour, weather and other conditions permitted. At the periodic conferences held by the Commander-in-Chief and attended by the Army commanders and their senior staff officers, the situation was discussed, progress and requirements reported, and supplementary instructions issued. Thus, at a Conference on the 21st December, in the hope that by not exciting the enemy to retaliation opportunities might be gained for improving defences and resting the troops, Sir Douglas Haig directed that artillery activity should for the moment be allowed to

<sup>1</sup> The plans for defence adopted by the French were conceived on the same lines, but were not quite the same, as the British. The orders issued on 22nd Dec. 1917 directed the preparation of an Outpost Zone to be held lightly, with the object of delaying and disorganizing an attack, and giving time for dispositions to be made behind it. In rear of this zone a "Second Position" was to be constructed, to be held "en tout état de cause". In rear again was to be a "position de résistance". Great stress was laid on counter-attacks.

die down, and raids only carried out for the purpose of obtaining " identifications " and for training. He emphasized also the importance of utilizing to the utmost the power of the machine gun in defence, and gave instructions for the study of schemes for the demolition of bridges and communications, so that these might be destroyed in the event of retirement becoming necessary.

On the 4th January 1918 orders were issued from G.H.Q. for the construction of two light railway lines running north and south behind the British front, with cross lines at intervals, for the purpose of facilitating the transfer of reserves. To provide the material and labour required for this work, the further development of light railways in the forward areas was to be curtailed, and additional roadways were to be constructed by the troops themselves in their stead.

With the same object in view, namely, of increasing reserve power, on the 10th January secret instructions were sent to the Fourth Army to draw up plans and have everything in readiness for a voluntary retirement from the Passchendaele salient. General Rawlinson was to report as to the time which it would take to complete such a withdrawal, the number of divisions which would thereby be released for transfer to the reserve, and the line to which, in his opinion, the retirement should be made.

Although raiding activities were reduced during the winter as directed, vigilant observation of the enemy was maintained on the whole front, both on the ground and from the air. By this means, and from other sources of information, the British commanders were kept well posted as to the progress of the hostile preparations for attack, and the arrival of additional German troops. The enemy, for his part, displayed a much more aggressive spirit than during the two preceding winters. He did his best to interfere with the British preparations for defence by means of local attacks, and by bombardments and raids, especially on the Third Army front and against the Ypres Salient.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The number of raids attempted by the Germans between 8th Dec. and 21st March was estimated at 225, of which not more than 62 were successful in obtaining identifications. The local attacks, usually preceded and accompanied by heavy bombardments, were in some cases made in considerable strength ; but in no case did the enemy retain any ground of tactical importance. The most formidable of these local attacks was made on 30th/31st Dec., on a front of 4,000 yards, seven miles S.S.W. of Cambrai. It was repulsed by the 68rd (R.N.) Division after two days' fighting, which cost the division 1,500 casualties. The British losses from gas shelling were in some cases considerable.

The general state of the defences at the beginning of January, as well as the nature of the work being done on them, was described in a report furnished to the War Office by G.H.Q. on the 3rd January, in response to a request made by the War Cabinet for information. According to this report, the Forward Zone in those areas which had been for some time in British occupation was already well organized, depth having been given by machine-gun posts and strongpoints to the front, support and reserve "lines" normally constructed. From Hermies (12 miles N.N.E. Sketches of Péronne)<sup>1</sup> to Hollebeke (south-east of Ypres) the A and B. Forward Zone was classed as fair to strong, except between Hermies and Bullecourt—a stretch of seven miles—where, however, the wire was exceptionally strong and the enemy as much as a thousand yards distant. South of Hermies, where the ground had been taken over from the French in April 1917, and where lay the Cambrai battlefield, the defences were not so far advanced; but the zone would be strong when completed. At the other end of the line, also, north of Hollebeke, the front zone had not long been in our possession, the ground having been won during the Passchendaele fighting, and the defences had still to be developed. All work on the Forward Zone was much hampered and delayed by incessant trench-mortar and other fire, as well as by the hard weather.

Lack of labour had so far prevented much work being done on the Battle and Rear Zones, especially the latter; but the lines as a rule were wired, there were a number of machine-gun emplacements, and the lines were being connected in places by switches designed to limit the lateral spread of a break-through.

Old systems of entrenchments, now in back areas, which had fallen into disrepair but were still wired, were being made use of, and maps were prepared to show certain old lines of defence still in existence. One of these lay to the west of Arras; another ran from Sainly (18 miles W.N.W. of Lille) to Oostvleteren (9 miles north-west of Ypres); a third ran from Béthune, north-westwards in rear of the canals, towards St. Omer; whilst the "B.C.D. Line" covered the ports of Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk.

Communications in some areas were very hard to maintain, particularly in the Ypres Salient, about Arras, and the old battle areas of the Somme. Considerable work

<sup>1</sup> See Sketches A and B. Places not marked on the Sketches are described by reference to those which are.

was necessary on roads, said the report, and, ahead of them, on tramways, "slab roads"<sup>1</sup> and "duck-walks".

The proposed extension of the British front southwards had not been carried out when the G.H.Q. report on the defences of the 8th January, above abbreviated, was rendered; but a relief of the French in Flanders had taken

**Sketch 1.** place. During the latter half of November and the beginning of December the French First Army, of six divisions, under General Anthoine, had been withdrawn, the British and Belgian troops who had been on its flanks closing inwards to join on the Coverbeek stream near the south-western corner of Houthulst Forest. Following this change, two of the French divisions (XXXVI. Corps) relieved the two British divisions in the Nieuport sector on the coast. The net reduction of the French troops in Flanders therefore amounted to four divisions.

Towards the end of November, in accordance with the arrangement made with General Pétain on the 18th October, G.H.Q. detailed two divisions to begin the relief of the French on the right flank; but before they could do so it became necessary to divert them to assist in stopping the German counter-attack at Cambrai. When on the 1st December the Chief of the Imperial General Staff telegraphed that M. Clemenceau desired information on the subject of the relief, Sir Douglas Haig replied that he had been obliged to send divisions to Italy and to use at Cambrai the two intended for the relief of the French. He drew attention to the fact that the enemy had at the moment 69 divisions on the front between the right of the British and the sea, of which three alone were *Landwehr*, whilst on the whole of the remainder of the Western Front there were only 79 German divisions, of which eleven were *Landwehr*. As active operations were still in progress, he did not, he said, feel justified in carrying out any extension.

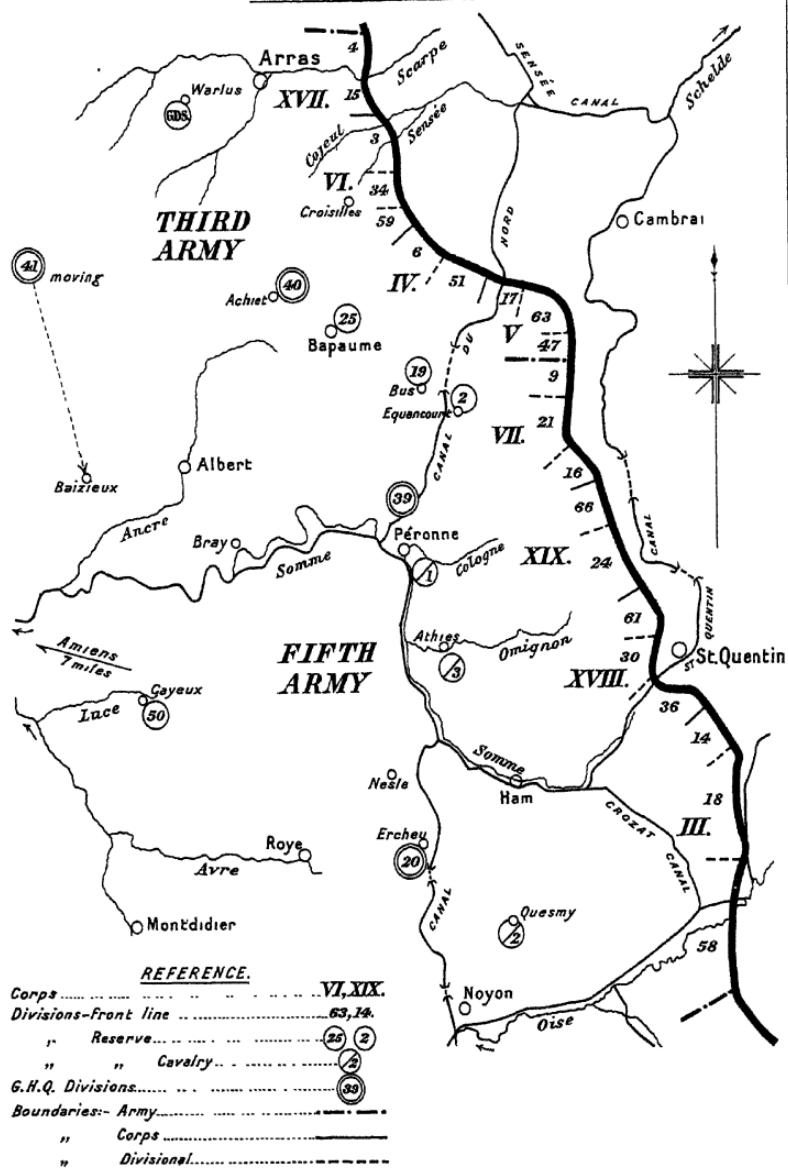
On the 14th December, General Pétain wrote to press that the relief might be begun, and next day Sir Douglas Haig received a cipher telegram from the War Office stating that M. Clemenceau had threatened to resign unless the extension were carried out as far as Berry au Bac (18 miles N.N.W. of Reims), that is (measured from the Oise) thirty-seven miles more than originally requested. The French Premier, it continued, had eventually consented to the matter being referred to the Supreme War Council: pending the next meeting, the Military Representatives at

<sup>1</sup> Slabs cut from tree-trunks, but not trimmed into planks.



Sketch 5.

**Distribution of  
CORPS AND DIVISIONS, FIFTH AND THIRD ARMIES,  
21<sup>st</sup> March.**



Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch)

Versailles had been directed to investigate it and advise on the best solution.

At the meeting which took place between Sir Douglas Haig and General Pétain on the 17th December the latter urged as reasons for the extension, that the British offensive operations had come to an end, and that there were fears of a German attack on his troops near Chalons and through Switzerland. Sir Douglas Haig represented that the British troops after the recent severe fighting required a period of rest, and that the strength of units, depleted by casualties, was not being replenished by drafts from England ; but nevertheless he would relieve two divisions on the 10th January and endeavour to take over as far as the Oise by the end of the month ; but the precise date for the later relief could only be settled when the situation became clearer. This arrangement General Pétain accepted. However favourable the situation might become, he had no intention of making any " main attack " before August, thus confirming his earlier statement to Sir Douglas Haig.<sup>1</sup>

It was not until the 10th January, after an interval of over three weeks, that the Military Representatives at Versailles made their formal recommendation, without giving reasons, that the point of junction of the French and British Armies should be on the left bank of the Ailette, between that river and the Soissons-Laon road, about 17 miles from the Oise, but left the exact point to be decided by the two Commanders-in-Chief, who eventually fixed it at  $5\frac{1}{2}$  miles eastwards of the Oise.

The relief of the French Sixth Army was punctually begun on the 10th January, the XVIII. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir I. Maxse) completing the taking over of the sector, opposite St. Quentin, on the British right, from the French III. Corps on the 14th January. The 36th and 61st Divisions were sent into the line, and the 30th held in reserve. Similarly, between the 27th and 30th January, the III. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir R. H. K. Butler) with the 58th and 14th Divisions, took over from the " Groupement " d'Ugny le Gay " and the French I. Corps, the long sector astride the Oise from just south of Barisis to the right of the XVIII. Corps. The French declared that ten miles of this was inaccessible to the enemy, owing to the marshes of the Oise ; but this did not prove to be the case in the following March. Heavy artillery reliefs were carried out subsequent to the corps taking over. As the enemy was

Map 1.  
Sketch A.

<sup>1</sup> See page 22.

fully employed working on his front trenches, which were evidently in a bad condition, all reliefs were carried out without interference. The French, who had obviously done little recent work in the sector, handed over a front position in good condition; but it was of the old type, not developed in depth into a Forward Zone. Behind this there was no more than a belt of wire, sited to cover the "Second Line", so that both Battle Zone and Rear Zone had still to be constructed.

After the extension had been carried out, the British Armies, reduced in number from five to four by the despatch of General Plumer and his force to Italy, stood as follows

**Sketches** from right to left :—  
B and 5.

Fifth Army : from Barisis—St. Gobain railway to near Gouzeaucourt (opposite Cambrai).

Third Army : from above boundary to Gavrelle (6 miles E by N of Arras).

First Army : from Gavrelle to a mile north of Armentières.

Fourth Army : from the last boundary to the Forest of Houthulst.<sup>1</sup>

The total comprised 47 British divisions, 4 Canadian, 5 Australian, 1 New Zealand and 5 Cavalry divisions.

Whilst the relief of the French was in progress, and until a scheme had been prepared, practically no defence work could be carried on in the new sector. On the remainder of the British front it was delayed by the same extension of the line, which entailed the withdrawal of a number of divisions, and artillery, engineer and labour units transferred to the Fifth Army. Yet the situation was daily growing more dangerous. The signature of an

		First Army	Third Army	Fourth Army	Fifth Army
Corps headquarters	.	4*	4	7	4 (1 cavalry)
Divisions	.	14*	15	18	10
Cavalry divisions	.	..	..	..	5
R.H.A. Army Brigade	.	..	..	..	1
R.F.A. Army Brigades	.	10	5	16	13
R.G.A. Army Brigades	.	16	16	33	12
R.G.A. Siege Batteries not brigaded	.	12	14	39	6
Anti-Aircraft Batteries	.	5	5	6	3
R.E. Companies and Units	.	49	47	82	32
R.F.C. Brigades	.	1	1	1	1
Miles of Front	.	38	28	23	42

\* In addition the Portuguese corps of 2 divisions.

Armistice on the Eastern Front on the 15th December and the opening of peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk on the 22nd December, made it quite clear that the Germans were now free to continue the withdrawal of a large proportion of troops from the East : in fact as fast as their means of transport would permit. The Intelligence Directorate, War Office, and the Intelligence Section G.H.Q., whose deductions as to the enemy strength and forecasts of the enemy intentions mentioned throughout the narrative proved of remarkable accuracy, calculated that ten divisions a month could be transported, having regard to the excellent German railway communications. By the end of December it was known that at least ten and probably fifteen divisions had already been transferred to the West, in addition to drafts, totalling about 80,000, of selected officers and men. Some of the forces having been sent to Italy, the strength of the German Armies in France and Belgium was estimated at 160 divisions,<sup>1</sup> and a forecast was made that if German troops were brought from Italy as well as from Russia and Rumania the enemy might have 185 divisions on the Western Front by the end of February, 195 by the end of March and 200 by the 1st May, out of a grand total of 241 German divisions and possibly some Austrian formations at his disposal.<sup>2</sup> In addition, large reinforcements of heavy guns, trench mortars and aircraft were expected from the East, and possibly other troops provided by Germany's Allies. Further, Germany had the power, which the French and British lacked, of keeping her divisions up to establishment.<sup>3</sup>

Thus it appeared that not only would the Allied forces on the Western Front be outnumbered from the outset, but that until the American armies were ready to take the field, the relative numerical superiority of the Germans would continuously grow—in a memorandum the C.I.G.S. estimated that on the 1st May they would have a superiority of 196,000 combatants over the combined Allied forces in France—since they could replace losses, whilst the Allies could not do so.

At this critical moment the War Cabinet came to two

<sup>1</sup> Actually 161. Gehre.

<sup>2</sup> 248 divisions including cavalry, and ten brigades. Kuhl, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> The number of reinforcements available in German depots, including the 1920 Class of recruits, was put at 950,000. Kuhl, p. 58, states it was calculated at this time that there would be 112,000 men per month, up to the end of July, available as reinforcements ; after this date only 60,000 (recovered wounded).

decisions which adversely affected the security of the Western Front. The first was not to provide the reinforcements demanded, thus leaving the British Armies in France weaker in fighting troops than they had been a year before;<sup>1</sup> the second was to order the reorganization of the divisions in France on a reduced establishment. During the autumn of 1917, G.H.Q. were constantly urging that all available reinforcements should be sent to France, there to be trained for immediate incorporation in the units in that theatre. Against compliance with this request three considerations were advanced: first, France was not the only theatre; secondly, a large proportion of the available drafts consisted of "boys" under 19 years of age; and, thirdly, in the Prime Minister's opinion, if more men were sent to France they would be used up in indecisive operations.

The very difficult question therefore of the allocation of man-power available in Great Britain had in December<sup>2</sup> been referred to a Cabinet Committee. An advance copy of their draft report, drawn up with the assistance of the Ministry of National Service, was sent to the Army Council early in January. This report laid down two general principles: first, that final success in the War depended on the safeguarding of the staying power of the Allies until such time as the increase of the American forces restored the balance of superiority decisively in their favour; secondly, that the safeguarding of staying power involved the maintenance not only of the Armies, but of the nations as a whole. The Committee held that in both respects our Allies were becoming increasingly dependent upon us; that the British Empire had to bear the principal share in maintaining the sea-power of the Allies, in dealing with the enemy's submarines, in shipbuilding, in transport of food and supplies of all kinds, in the supply of coal and many kinds of ordnance and munitions, and had, moreover, to provide in a great degree for the financial support of all its Allies. Also that even the transport of American troops depended ultimately to a considerable extent on the maintenance of British shipping.

<sup>1</sup> The numbers were reported as 1,192,668 in Jan. 1917 and 1,097,906 in Jan. 1918. But investigation shows that in the former total Railway, Inland Water Transport and other units (24,202) were included, which in 1918 were shown separately as "Transportation" (72,065). Thus for the purposes of comparison the totals should be, 1,168,466 and 1,097,906. See Appendix 7.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter I. The subject of man-power absorbed much of the time of the Cabinet and is an immense one. Only the barest outline can be given here. Some further details are given in Appendix 7.

In consequence, the Committee had adopted the following order of priority in the distribution of man-power, whatever the number of men available might be: first the fighting requirements of the Navy and the Air Force; secondly, shipbuilding, with, but after it, the construction of aeroplanes and tanks; thirdly, food production, timber felling and the provision of food storage accommodation (to set shipping free). The Army apparently was to be considered next, but it was not so stated.

The Committee, not one of whose members was a soldier, showed they were aware of the inevitable result of their decisions, namely, that the Ministry of National Service would not be able to find the 615,000 men demanded by the B.E.F. for 1918, and there would be little more than 100,000 "A" men available for it. They suggested that there were two methods of dealing with the deficit: (a) by reducing wastage and (b) by rendering a larger proportion of the Army available for first-line service. The forecast of wastage made by the Army Council was, they considered, excessive, and losses in 1918 would in any case be reduced by standing on the defensive, and the conservation of strength on the Western Front might be ensured by the adoption of suitable tactics and strategy. They therefore proposed to provide only the 100,000 "A" men whom the Minister of National Service calculated would be available, and recommended the reduction of the strength of the cavalry, and of the number of infantry battalions in each division from twelve to nine;<sup>1</sup> the latter step had already been taken by the French (and, for that matter, by the Germans): from the surplus created by this reorganization additional divisions should be formed in order to constitute "a mobile army of manœuvre". Nothing was said, it will be noted, about reducing the forces engaged in minor theatres, and thus freeing the drafts, about 192,000 men, annually required to maintain them.

The recommendations of the Cabinet Committee provoked a strong protest from the military members of the Army Council. It must be expected, they pointed out, that the enemy would force the fighting in 1918, and the assumption that fewer losses would be incurred by adopting a defensive policy was contrary to experience:<sup>2</sup> if only

<sup>1</sup> The pioneer battalions were to be retained, but reduced from 4 to 3 companies.

<sup>2</sup> The German leaders held the same view, see Chapter VII. See also "1916" Vol. I., p. 496, where the exact comparison of the French and

100,000 "A" men were allocated to the Army, it would be more than 580,000 men short, the number of lower category men to be made available not much exceeding that of the "A" category which it was proposed to withdraw from the Army for other services.<sup>1</sup> The Council were opposed to changing the twelve-battalion organization of divisions, to which the Army was accustomed both for tactical and administrative work : in regard to the formation of more

German casualties at Verdun now available shows that during the months in which the Germans were the attackers the French had the heavier losses, and that when the tide turned and the French took the offensive, their adversaries suffered more heavily than they did.

<sup>1</sup> According to a War Office return (see Appendix 7), there were in Great Britain and Ireland on 1st Jan. 1918, excluding Dominion troops, 607,408 trained "A" men available and 359,270 "unavailable" (permanent cadres, administrative duties, recruits in training, etc.) out of a total of 74,408 officers and 1,486,459 other ranks. The Cabinet Committee on Man-Power on the same date placed the number of men in the Home Forces available for drafts at 449,000. There were in Ireland on 1st Jan. 90,445 troops, included in the Home Forces, of whom 62,598 were infantry. On 21st Dec. 1917 the First Sea Lord had informed the War Cabinet that the Board of Admiralty had provisionally decided that the landing of any enemy force larger than 70,000 which might attempt invasion could be effectually interfered with by the Naval Forces.

On 1st Jan. there were employed in theatres other than the Western Front, including native troops, 35,695 officers (Italy, 4,851) and 852,620 (Italy 104,252) other ranks, of whom more than a quarter of a million were in Egypt and Palestine, and another quarter of a million in Mesopotamia.

According to a statement, dated 7th Sept. 1918, compiled in the War Office for the information of the Prime Minister, the following was "the total number of men sent to France for all purposes" up to the end of August 1918 :—

Before 21st March :

British Fighting Troops "A" . . . . .	129,337
" " " " "B" . . . . .	5,299
	134,636
Dominions . . . . .	32,384
Labour and Non-Fighting Troops . . . . .	7,359
	174,379

From 21st March to 31st Aug. :

British Fighting Troops "A" . . . . .	418,990
" " " " "B" . . . . .	42,925
	461,915
Dominions . . . . .	73,190
Labour and Non-Fighting Troops . . . . .	8,900
	544,005

These figures do not include 2 divisions sent from Italy and 2 from Egypt and Palestine ; nor 44 battalions made available for France, 23 from Egypt and Palestine, 12 from Salonika, 9 from Italy, obtained by weakening the divisions there. These additions represent about another 100,000 men.

It is obvious that the British Armies in France could have been brought up to full establishment before 21st March without unduly weakening the forces elsewhere had the Government so willed.

divisions from surplus battalions, they reminded the Cabinet that about one-third of a division consisted of artillery and other non-infantry units, which would have to be provided, and that the shortage of men in the other arms was becoming as serious as in the infantry : moreover, the reduction of divisions to nine battalions would not only fail to provide the infantry for additional divisions, but would not free sufficient men to maintain the nine at establishment : further, they anticipated that, without a considerable increase in the number of men to be made available for the Army, even if a nine-battalion organization were adopted, the Home Defence forces reduced by four divisions (which had already been decided)<sup>1</sup> and the cavalry in France cut down, several divisions would still have to be disbanded during 1918 in order to keep the remainder up to establishment.

The protest of the Army Council, which had no effect on the War Cabinet, closed with the following warning :

" There is every prospect of heavy fighting on the Western Front from February onwards, and the result " may well be that even if the divisions successfully withstand the shock of the earlier attack, they may become " so exhausted and attenuated as to be incapable of continuing the struggle until the Americans can effectually intervene. In short, the Council would regard the acceptance of the recommendations in the draft report, " without further effort to provide the men they consider necessary for the maintenance of the forces in the field " during 1918, as taking an unreasonably grave risk of " losing the War and sacrificing to no purpose the British Army on the Western Front."

After these representations had been submitted to the War Cabinet, the idea of creating additional divisions was dropped ; but the reduction of the infantry of divisions from twelve to nine battalions was adhered to—it is understood on French advice.<sup>2</sup> It was not so much the nature of the change—which would indeed increase the proportion of guns per thousand infantry, which was eminently desirable—but the time selected for it which was open to objection. Orders for the reorganization were issued from

<sup>1</sup> The organization of the Home Defence forces in 3 cavalry brigades, 13 cyclist brigades, 8 divisions and 54 independent infantry brigades is given in Appendix 7.

<sup>2</sup> There was apparently some expectation at the time that the U.S.A. would furnish units to bring the divisions up to 12 battalions again.

the War Office on the 10th January 1918, when the enemy attack was threatening.<sup>1</sup>

The reduction could not be effected by the simple process of disbanding one battalion in each of the three infantry brigades of a division and using the men thus made available to bring the remaining three battalions up to establishment. The 145 battalions from which those to be broken up were to be selected were very unevenly distributed. Some divisions had as many as six, whilst others had none. A movement of troops on a considerable scale between divisions, and even between corps and Armies, had to be planned and executed before the 47 divisions affected could be organized in their new form, and the breaking of old ties involved much heartburning and many protests. The order having been given, nothing, however, remained but to carry it out with the least possible delay, in order to shorten the period of anxiety and danger which was inevitable, whilst the changes were taking place and work on the defences was interrupted. It could only be hoped that the Germans would defer attack until there had been time for the troops to settle down to the new order of things and for commanders and staffs to accustom themselves to the modifications in orders and tactical methods which the changes involved.

By the 18th January all the details had been settled, and the Commander-in-Chief was in a position to report to the War Office how he proposed to carry out his instructions, and which battalions were to be broken up. In the circumstances he considered it best to reduce all divisions, except those of the Dominions, forthwith to the new establishment, there being only sufficient infantry available to complete nine battalions and one pioneer battalion per division with a small surplus over :<sup>2</sup> there was no advantage, he said, in postponing reduction temporarily in a few divisions : everything would be ready for the first stage of

<sup>1</sup> It was laid down that no Regular, First-Line Territorial or Yeomanry battalions were to be disbanded ; the most recently raised Territorial (Second-Line) and Service (New Army) battalions were to be broken up first. A list of 145 battalions was sent to the Commander-in-Chief from which to choose, a hope being expressed that he would not find it necessary to reduce all divisions to nine battalions. He was asked his views as to how far divisional ammunition columns (which carried S.A.A.) and medical units could be reduced as a result of the reorganization. In regard to Dominion troops, nothing was to be done until the wishes of their Governments had been ascertained.

<sup>2</sup> The surplus was organized temporarily into "entrenching battalions," which were used for work on defences, until required to replace casualties.

the reorganization to begin on the 29th January, and it was hoped to complete it by the 15th February.<sup>1</sup>

Sir Douglas Haig's proposals were accepted, after some further correspondence as to the course to be adopted in the case of the Guards and Royal Naval Divisions, and the Dominion troops. In all, 115 battalions in France were disbanded, 38 were amalgamated to form 19 units, and seven were converted into pioneers. The four Canadian divisions in France retained their 12-battalion organization, and each battalion was made up to a strength of one hundred men over establishment by breaking up the 5th Canadian Division then in England. The five Australian divisions likewise retained their 12-battalion organization, their drafts enabling them to maintain their establishments. The New Zealand Division did likewise, its fourth infantry brigade, in England, being broken up to furnish reinforcements and to form three "entrenching battalions" as a reserve.

Despite the desire and urgent need for haste, it was not found possible to carry out the reorganization as rapidly as the Commander-in-Chief had hoped. The dates on which it was completed were : in the First Army, 19th February ; in the Fifth, the 25th February ; in the Third, 27th February ; and in the Fourth Army, the largest, the 4th March.

During the previous months certain changes in the higher Staff appointments had taken place. On the 24th January 1918 Lieut.-General Hon. Sir Herbert Lawrence succeeded Lieut.-General Sir Lancelot Kiggell, who had broken down in health, as Chief of the General Staff.<sup>2</sup> Major-General Sir Richard Butler, who had been Deputy Chief of the General Staff for two years, and whom Sir Douglas Haig would have desired to see appointed as Chief, was given command of the III. Corps ; Major-General G. P. Dawnay, who had been in the Gallipoli and Palestine theatres, took over his work, with the title of Major-General, General Staff. A little earlier Lieut.-General Travers

<sup>1</sup> The divisions in Italy, whilst retained there, were left on the 12-battalion organization ; they were to be reduced to the lower one on their return to France.

<sup>2</sup> General Lawrence, who had retired from the Army after the S. African War, had served in the Gallipoli campaign from May 1915 until the evacuation as brigade and divisional commander, and with the Eastern Frontier Force in Egypt until Oct. 1916 ; he had then been in the United Kingdom, and had brought the 66th Division to France in March 1917 ; in Jan. 1918 he had succeeded Br.-General J. Charteris as head of the Intelligence Branch, G.H.Q.

Clarke had, on 23rd December 1917, taken over the duties of Q.M.G. from Lieut.-General Sir Ronald Maxwell, who was suffering from a fall from his horse.<sup>1</sup> Major-General G. M. Heath had in October 1917 succeeded Major-General Sir Robert Rice as Engineer-in-Chief, and at the end of January Br.-General E. Cox had become head of the Intelligence Branch in succession to Lieut.-General Hon. Sir H. Lawrence. Major-General H. M. Trenchard, General Officer Commanding the Royal Flying Corps in the Field, left France to become Chief of the Air Staff in London on the 18th January 1918, being succeeded by Major-General J. M. Salmond.

Major-General S. D'A. Crookshank, who from November 1917 had been acting Director-General of Transportation, on the 19th March 1918 received the definite appointment, *vice* Sir P. Nash (a civilian with rank of Major-General), Transportation coming again under the Quartermaster-General, instead of being, as it had been for a time, an independent department.

#### NOTE

#### COMPOSITION OF A DIVISION IN MARCH 1918

H.Q. of Division ; H.Q. R.A. ; H.Q. R.E. ; H.Q.'s. infantry brigades (3) ; 9 infantry battalions ; 2 R.F.A. brigades (six 18-pdr. batteries, two 4·5-inch howitzer batteries) ; divisional ammunition column ; 5 trench-mortar batteries (3 light and 2 medium) ; 3 field companies R.E. ; signal company R.E. ; pioneer battalion ; one battalion of the Machine-Gun Corps ; train (4 companies A.S.C.) ; 3 field ambulances, R.A.M.C. ; mobile veterinary section A.V.C. ; employment company (employed on labour duties within the division).

<sup>1</sup> General Clarke, after being in France, had been on the Q. Staff at Salonika from Sept. 1915 to July 1917. He had then returned to France as D.A.G.

## CHAPTER III

### THE DEBATES ON MILITARY POLICY

The Joint Notes of the Versailles Military Representatives—German Peace Overtures—The Examination of the Prospects of Final Success—Endeavours to secure the use of American Troops for Amalgamation—Versailles Joint Notes Nos. 12 and 14 Recommending Operations against Turkey and the Formation of a General Reserve—Views of the Commander-in-Chief—Enemy Preparations.

At their meeting on the 1st December 1917 the Supreme War Council<sup>1</sup> had directed the Military Representatives to examine the entire military situation, consider plans, and report their recommendations ; for on the plans depended the strategical distribution of the Allied forces between the various theatres of war. Having given their orders, the Council adjourned, not to meet again for exactly two months. During this interval, however, the War Cabinet in London continued to consider the question of military policy, assisted in their deliberations not only by their responsible naval and military advisers, but by the views of the Military Representatives at Versailles. The latter officers between the 13th December and the 23rd January, as a result of their studies, communicated to the Allied Governments a series of “Joint Notes”.<sup>2</sup>

The first of these Notes recommended the adoption of a defensive policy from the North Sea to the Adriatic and in the Balkans, with preparations for a systematic retirement from part, at any rate, of the last-named front. This defensive policy was not, however, to preclude—but rather to be considered as preparatory to—later offensive measures

<sup>1</sup> See page 34.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Arthur H. Frazier, the First Secretary of the U.S. Embassy in Paris, attended most of the meetings of the Permanent Military Representatives during this period (1st to 14th), in place of General Bliss, who had gone back temporarily to America. The other members were General Weygand, General Cadorna and General Sir Henry Wilson.

in 1918 in any theatre of war which might be decided upon, when the political situation in Russia and the military situation in Italy might have become more clearly defined. No recommendations were made as regards Palestine, Mesopotamia or Armenia. In conclusion, the Military Representatives stated that they were about to study the possibilities of a co-ordinated air offensive.

Joint Note No. 2, dated the 20th December, recommended the reorganization of the Belgian Army into nine divisions of nine battalions each, instead of the twelve battalions already suggested, the balance of infantry officers and men being utilized for the formation of new artillery units.

Joint Note No. 3, of the 21st December, considered the question of reinforcements for Italy and advised that no more men or guns should be sent there from the Western Front.

Joint Note No. 4, dated the 23rd December, merely confirmed the advice given in No. 1 with regard to the Balkans, and made detailed suggestions as to the retirement proposed therein, if enemy action rendered such a movement necessary.

Joint Note No. 5, dated the 24th December, dealt with the situation in Russia and Rumania, with special reference to the danger of the enemy drawing supplies of wheat and oil from those countries, and to the possibility of cutting short such supplies by giving assistance to the White Russian groups which were endeavouring to resist the Bolsheviks. The Military Representatives opined that these groups would not be able to maintain resistance for an indefinite length of time unless direct communication could be opened with them either by way of Vladivostok and the Siberian railway, or, after operations against Turkey, by way of Tiflis : such operations might lead to a separate peace, the opening of the Dardanelles and an easier route to Russia : on the other hand, if South Russian and Rumanian wheat and oil supplies fell into the hands of the enemy, they would, it was suggested, place the Germans in a position to bargain with Switzerland and force her to concede a free passage for their Armies through that country. This most unlikely manœuvre, never contemplated by the Germans, could not have led to a rapid decision ; the French authorities, however, always professed to regard it as highly probable, and General Pétain disposed reserves on his right flank to counter it.

Joint Note No. 6, of the 25th December, drawn up before the Military Representatives adjourned over Christmas, advised that an Allied offensive on the Italian front was not for the moment possible or desirable.

The next three Notes, Nos. 7, 8 and 9, were all issued on the 9th January. They dealt respectively with aviation, means of transportation, and tanks. They advocated the formation of Inter-Allied Committees, reporting to the Supreme War Council, to ensure co-ordination in the use of the above-mentioned resources. The most important of the points suggested for the consideration of these committees, when appointed, was a concentration in the Eastern Mediterranean of air forces—badly required in France—in order to attack vulnerable links in the Turkish lines of communication.

Whilst these academic expressions of opinion, which showed a bias towards operations against Turkey, were being committed to paper, the German-Bolshevik negotiations for peace on the Eastern Front had been continued, and on Christmas Day overtures were made by Germany to induce the Allies to join in them. Although considerable doubt was felt as to the enemy's object in taking this course, seeing that conditions had changed so much in his favour, the opportunity opened up by his advances could not be ignored.<sup>1</sup> The War Cabinet in London consequently proceeded to examine the prospects of the Allies should hostilities be continued, and called on Sir William Robertson and Sir Douglas Haig for their views.

In a paper submitted by the former on the 29th December, that is before the Cabinet Committee on Man-Power had made the report discussed in the last chapter (so that the C.I.G.S. was hampered by not knowing what forces would be available), he reviewed the whole situation, and the enemy's advantages and possible plans. His main points were that it was prudent to assume that Germany would try to win a decisive success before America could intervene in force : the Entente Powers must for the time being act on the defensive, accepting the disadvantages that the defensive would bring in its train : Germany's best objectives of attack would be the Channel ports, Paris and, repeating Caporetto, Northern Italy : she might by feints

<sup>1</sup> It is now known that the peace offer was insisted on by the Bolshevik representatives at the Brest-Litovsk Conference ; the proposal was accepted and an offer promulgated by Herr von Kuhlmann, the German representative and Minister of Foreign Affairs, because he felt certain that nothing would come of it.

and spreading false reports try to induce us to disperse our reserves before she struck : for ourselves we must determine to endure until America was ready, at the price of considerable sacrifices, which the people of this country would make if they were made to realize that they were fighting for their very lives and Imperial existence : he suggested that further effort was within our power, and the two essentials for success were to provide all the men possible to fight on land and to find adequate numbers of ships for transport of supplies and American troops : that, having withstood the enemy offensive, our time would come : the only alternative would be a peace which must eventually be disastrous to the British Empire.

The War Cabinet, having taken cognisance of this paper, set some written general questions before the C.I.G.S., which seemed to indicate that they had begun to doubt the ability of the Allies to win the War. The essence of these may be stated in one sentence : did the prospects of final success justify the sacrifice involved in a continuation of the struggle ? To this General Robertson could but reply that the answer depended on whether the Entente could or could not hope to become relatively stronger than the enemy : that numerical superiority would not be attained by attempts to weaken Germany by attacking Austria, Bulgaria or Turkey, but only by an increase in Allied strength : having now seen the draft report on Man-Power, he suggested further investigation to determine whether a better distribution of resources than that proposed could not be made : he repeated the opinion, already expressed in many previous memoranda, that "we can "win if we will but determine to do so, and if we act accordingly".

Sir Douglas Haig was summoned to a meeting of the War Cabinet on the 7th January, when he was asked whether he thought the military situation in six to twelve months' time would show improvement from the British point of view. Having notoriously great difficulty in explaining himself verbally, and being placed in the equivocal position of having to convince the War Cabinet that, although the Passchendaele operation had inflicted heavy losses on the Germans, they were still very powerful, his reply left the impression that he thought they would not venture to attack. But in a written reply which he handed in next day and which was read at a meeting on the following day, he expressed himself as follows :—

" In my opinion the crucial period for the Allies is the next few months. During this period the Central Powers may make a determined effort to force a decision on the Western Front, i.e. on the Italian, French or British front. I regard such an effort on the part of the enemy in the light of a gamble with the determination to risk everything in order to secure an early and favourable decision. Provision must be made to meet such an eventuality and to replace the losses which would certainly be incurred in withstanding a heavy and sustained attack."

This provision of troops, the Field-Marshal pointed out, was urgent whether the enemy attack was made against the French, the Italians or the British : if made against the first, the British Armies would not be strong enough, as they were in 1916, to relieve pressure on their Allies by a counter-offensive : they would have to help the French by sending reinforcements or by taking over more line, either course involving a dangerous weakening of the British front : the steps proposed in the draft report on Man-Power were quite inadequate to meet the situation anticipated, and consequently, if that situation arose, there would be cause for anxiety for the security of the Western Front : finally he summarized his view of future military prospects in the following words :—

" the military situation in six to twelve months' time will depend on how we have weathered the intervening period, our losses, and our ability to replace wastage and bring our units up to establishment. If steps are taken to secure the necessary reinforcements (possibly 100,000 per mensem) without delay, there is no doubt that we might confidently expect an improvement in the military situation. With the successful repulse of the enemy's attacks, with full cadres and adequate reinforcements, and with the accession of American military strength, the situation should, in my opinion, be so materially improved as to justify an expectation of obtaining satisfactory terms of peace."

The Prime Minister, not unnaturally, asked what could be thought of a man who now expressed an opinion totally different from that he had emitted two days before.

The Commander-in-Chief had, however, an opportunity on the 9th January of explaining his views personally to the Prime Minister, who tried to cajole him into admitting that the German Army was worn out and that there would

be no German offensive. Sir Douglas Haig, however, gave it as his opinion that if the German military authorities got their way, they would certainly attack and try to deliver a knock-out blow : the situation would then be critical for a few months, but the internal state of Germany was such that he did not consider the enemy would be able to continue the War if he failed to gain a decision in 1918.

It was put clearly before the War Cabinet, both by the C.I.G.S. and the Commander-in-Chief, that all depended on holding out until the U.S. Army became effective ; but it appeared that no American division was likely to be fit to take part in offensive operations before July, and even then not more than five divisions could be counted on : beyond the relief of a few French divisions on quiet fronts, no aid could be expected from the American troops in stemming a German offensive : if by any chance the defence broke down the entry of American troops into active operations might come too late. This point of view had been represented to the United States Government by the British Prime Minister early in December, and, through Lord Reading, to Colonel House, President Wilson's special representative in Europe, when the desirability was urged of incorporating American units in Allied formations, and postponing the creation of American Armies, under their own flag, until a later date.

The whole question of the disposal of the American troops, was, however, left to General Pershing's judgment, the Secretary of War, Mr. Newton D. Baker, on the 25th December 1917, having informed him that it was hoped that complete unity and co-ordination of action would be secured in the matter by conferences with the French and British Commanders-in-Chief.<sup>1</sup>

From the moment the United States of America entered the war, her Allies had begun to ask for men, as individuals to recruit their ranks, as companies to reinforce infantry battalions, and as units to be incorporated in their divisions. In consequence of these requests the instructions concerning his command, authority and duties in Europe, handed to General Pershing the day before he sailed by the Secretary of War, directed him to keep his forces together as a separate and distinct body.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pershing Experiences, pp. 281-3, 245.

<sup>2</sup> Pershing Experiences, p. 48. His instructions are given in Appendix 8. The corollary that a separate American Army would require separate lines of communication, and that their organization should precede the

In view of the urgency of the situation, the whole matter was discussed by General Pershing with Sir William Robertson and the British Controller of Shipping, Sir Joseph Maclay, on the 9th and 10th January ; and at the request of the American Commander-in-Chief, the C.I.G.S. put into writing the measures suggested. In a memorandum, dated the 10th January, General Robertson, therefore, outlined the situation which had arisen owing to Russia's defection, as it has been set forth in the previous pages, and urged consideration of the request that, in order to accelerate arrival, battalions, instead of complete divisions, should be sent over from America as they were organized : these units would at first be incorporated in British brigades,<sup>1</sup> later grouped in American brigades, which would be finally assembled to form divisions : the British Government, he was authorized to say, attached so much importance to this scheme, that if the U.S.A. would agree to it, they were willing to take the risk of cutting down temporarily the import of various supplies in order to find shipping to bring over 150 American battalions of the 45 divisions which it was understood were being organized in America : this, it was estimated, could be done within three or four months, without interfering in any way with the provision of British transport for the American Army already arranged—British ships were already bringing over about twelve thousand American soldiers per month : assurance was also given that the French Prime Minister was aware of the proposal and would raise no difficulties in regard to its application, his only wish being that General Pershing should do all he could to help either the British or the French.

In the preliminary discussions it had been explained to the American Commander-in-Chief—who had urged that if the British could provide extra ships for battalions, they could transport divisions—that battalions as such could be brought over five times as quickly as the same number

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deployment of the American forces, does not seem to have been considered until some time later. The ideal then aimed at was : “American train “operation, with American crews over French rails between our own “terminals”. This was never attained, and the Americans were largely dependent on French help to run their L. of C. until the end of the War. See the full story in “Transporting the A.E.F. in Western Europe 1917–“1919” by W. J. Wilgus.

<sup>1</sup> If the proposal were accepted, it was the intention to restore the 12-battalion divisional organization by adding one American battalion to each brigade, in the same way as Territorial battalions had been attached in 1914–15.

of infantry units accompanied by the other fighting and administrative troops of a division : that a crisis was approaching, and time was an essential factor : and that Great Britain was doing her full share and not trying to save her man-power, for she had to find 400,000 men for the Navy and maintain sea-transportation and large industrial undertakings for the general benefit of the Allies.

At a meeting of the three Commanders-in-Chief on the 19th January, General Pétain took the opportunity to impress on General Pershing that unless steps were taken to train divisional and artillery commanders it was idle to think of the U.S.A being able to put an effective Army into the field before the following winter, and he emphasized the necessity of getting as many battalions as possible into the line : by commanding them officers would be trained for higher commands. Sir Douglas Haig supported these views, and offered to train six divisional, three corps and one Army headquarters.<sup>1</sup>

The matter was further discussed at a conference on the 24th January, mentioned below, but was not settled until the 29th January, after several interchanges of messages between the American Commander-in-Chief and Washington. The main difficulty apparently was the desire of the American people to see some concrete result for their expenditure of money in the form of definite American Armies. General Pershing came to an agreement with Mr. Lloyd George, that the available sea-transport in question should be used to bring over the personnel of six complete divisions ; he declined to provide an American battalion for every British infantry brigade, but, at the suggestion of Sir Douglas Haig, consented that the infantry and auxiliary troops of these divisions should be trained by units with British divisions behind the line—the artillery in the end was trained under American supervision—and when trained assembled again into divisions under their own officers.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> At this conference General Pétain handed to Sir Douglas Haig a copy of the instructions given to General Humbert, commanding the Third Army (headquarters at Clermont, 40 miles S.S.E. of Amiens), which directed him to study how best to relieve or assist the British right in case of attack. This Third Army had been withdrawn from the line on 18th Jan., its right having been taken over by the Sixth Army and its left relieved by the British ; there was actually only one division in it at this date. The location of the French reserves is discussed in Chapter VI.

<sup>2</sup> The reasons against amalgamation set forth were : national sentiment against service under a foreign flag ; probable serious political opposition in the U.S.A. in order to embarrass the Government ; weapon for German

During these discussions, Joint Note No. 12, dated the 21st January, was handed in by the Military Representatives.<sup>1</sup> This surveyed the situation as a whole, and offered a definite recommendation for the operations of 1918. The view taken was that the security of the Western Front was essential, and that, as the enemy might produce a striking force of 96 divisions, this security would not be assured unless the front was treated as a single strategic field of action : the French and British forces on it should be continuously maintained at their existing aggregate and receive the reinforcement of not less than two American divisions a month, and all possible measures should be taken to strengthen defences, improve and co-ordinate means of transportation by rail and to increase substantially the Allied equipment in guns, machine guns, aeroplanes and tanks. If these conditions were fulfilled, it was considered that the enemy would be unable to gain a definite military decision on the Western Front in 1918 : the Italian front, too, could be rendered safe under certain specified conditions, which included reorganization of the Army and construction of defences : there should be strategic unity of action between the Armies in Italy and those in France, but no increase of the forces in Italy.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, short of unforeseeable and improbable contingencies, the Military

propagandists to stir up public opinion ; dissipation of direction and effort of the American Army ; differences in national characteristics which might lead to friction and eventual misunderstandings between the two countries ; additional man-power could be provided as quickly by some other plan. Maréchal Joffre advised the Americans against amalgamation, pointing out that in the British force, the Canadians and Australians, even the Irish and the Scots, were kept together in their own corps and divisions.

One can agree with General Pershing that "no people with a grain of "national pride would consent to furnish men to build up the army of "another nation. . . . We cannot permit", he said, "our men to serve "under another flag except in an extreme emergency [which, however, was "threatening, and justified the proposal], and then only temporarily." Pershing Experiences, p. 231.

In conversation with Sir William Robertson, General Pershing denied that the situation was so grave as the C.I.G.S. painted, and argued that, if the British were so short of men, why did they keep so many in Palestine. To that argument there was no answer.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 9. It was signed by General Weygand, General Sir Henry Wilson and General Cadorna. Joint Note No. 11 had suggested the raising of Chinese battalions, and was not approved by the Supreme War Council. No. 10 dealt with the proposed extension of the British front to Berry au Bac, to which reference has already been made.

<sup>2</sup> It was known by this time that German divisions had been withdrawn from Italy—this movement was begun early in Dec. and completed by the middle of Jan.—fairly conclusive proof that no further German offensive was intended, and an Austrian offensive was hardly likely to be a serious danger.

Representatives could detect no prospect of the Allies being able to secure in the Western theatre a final, or even a far-reaching, decision in 1918, and they could hold out no hope of a favourable peace without such a change in the balance of forces as it was hoped to reach in 1919 by the influx of American troops and the progressive exhaustion of the German Armies. The Military Representatives equally considered that any far-reaching success in the Balkans was clearly excluded. "There remains", they said, "the "Turkish theatre. To inflict such a crushing series of "defeats upon the Turkish Armies as would lead to the "final collapse of Turkey and her elimination from the "War would not only have the most far-reaching results "upon the general military situation, but might also, if not "too long deferred, be in time to enable the Allies to get "into direct touch with, and give effective help to, such "elements of resistance to German domination as may still "exist in Rumania and Southern Russia."

The Military Representatives were not prepared to prescribe the particular series of operations by which an offensive—which was to be strengthened by all the forces which could be spared from other theatres—could best be carried out against Turkey, beyond laying stress on the opportunities for strategic air offensives against the Turkish communications.

Thus the Military Representatives had reverted to and now advocated the scheme which Mr. Lloyd George had adumbrated to the War Cabinet three months earlier, on the 11th October, when it had been dropped on the reasoned advice of the responsible British military authorities, who had throughout urged concentration to the fullest extent on the Western Front and the cutting down of commitments in all other theatres to a minimum.

The Versailles Note, which was undoubtedly put forward with the full knowledge of General Foch, also entirely ignored the view of the British C.I.G.S. and of the British Commander-in-Chief—of which Sir Henry Wilson was aware—that the repulse of the expected German offensive would of itself open the way to a counter-offensive and to victory.<sup>1</sup> The Military Representatives saw no reasonable

<sup>1</sup> The opinion that German morale would not be able to survive failure in an attempt to gain a definite decision in the coming offensive, in view of the heavy losses which would be incurred in a repulse, had been emphasized in various studies of the situation written by the General Staff at G.H.Q. and at the War Office during this period. For example, as early as 7th Jan. the Intelligence Branch at G.H.Q., in a paper prepared for the

prospect of an Allied victory before 1919. Their Note, indeed, showed no real grasp of the situation. It was obvious—as they must have known, having free access to all available information—that the first condition they laid down as essential to the security of the Western Front, “that the French and British forces in France are continuously maintained at their present aggregate strength”, was unlikely to be fulfilled. Further, they had not made allowance for the reduction in establishment of the British divisions recently decided on, nor taken into account that the residuum of man-power in France and the proposed allocation of man-power in England would not nearly suffice to maintain the forces on the Western Front at their existing strength through a period of heavy fighting, even if no reinforcements were sent to other theatres.

The misapprehensions of the Military Representatives were at once pointed out by Sir William Robertson in a memorandum submitted to the War Cabinet on the 25th January. In this he said that whilst agreeing generally with the conditions stated in Joint Note No. 12 as essential to the security of the Franco-British and Italian fronts, he considered—and events fully justified what he wrote—the issues at stake so great and the balance in favour of the Allies so slight that anything further which might possibly strengthen the Western Front should be done: in his opinion the vital conditions specified would probably, if not certainly, be unfulfilled: General Pétain had informed him of a reduction of the French Army which was to begin in April, even if there were no fighting, and sooner if there were: the British divisions could not be kept up to establishment, even on a 9-battalion basis, if there were heavy fighting: the arrival of American troops was behind expectations and information as regards future prospects was unsatisfactory: for these reasons, the General Staff felt compelled to advise against an offensive in Turkey: according to the estimates of General Sir Edmund Allenby his operations could not be relied on to convert a Turkish retreat into a rout, or to compel a diversion of any considerable German force from the main theatres: the advantage of eliminating Turkey was obvious, but the question was one of possibility: of this, it was submitted,

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Commander-in-Chief, had written: “the German accession of morale is “not of a permanent character and is not likely to stand the strain of an “unsuccessful attack with consequent heavy losses. . . . If Germany “attacks and fails she will be ruined.”

the War Office and the Admiralty must be the best judges, and they had advised against it : divisions for the operations in Palestine could not be found without additional danger to the Western Front, whilst provision of transportation material for them would militate against improvement of the means for moving troops in France and Italy : in conclusion, an offensive campaign against Turkey would be difficult, if not impossible, to prosecute with success, while persistence in it would endanger the situation on the Western, the vital, Front.

After consideration of the memorandum submitted by the C.I.G.S., the War Cabinet decided that the questions raised in Joint Note No. 12 should be left for discussion at the forthcoming meeting of the Supreme War Council. This was to be attended by Mr. Lloyd George and Lord Milner, Minister without portfolio, who were given full authority to represent the Cabinet in regard to any decision which had to be taken by the Council.

Joint Note No. 12 had been followed on the 23rd January by another important one, No. 14,<sup>1</sup> which advised the creation of a General Reserve for the Franco-British and Italian fronts, and asked that the Supreme War Council should decide on its formation at their next meeting as a matter of great urgency. To enable the Military Representatives to prepare for the discussion of the proposal, it was requested that the Governments should furnish them with the views of the Commanders-in-Chief and Chiefs of the Staff as to the numbers, situation and command of such a reserve.

A proposal of this nature had been anticipated by Sir Douglas Haig, who had already communicated his views thereon to the C.I.G.S., stating that the forces at his disposal were insufficient to permit of his sparing any troops to form part of a General Reserve under a central authority, but suggesting that it might be composed of divisions brought from other theatres :<sup>2</sup> arrangements had been made, he pointed out, between himself and General Pétain

<sup>1</sup> No. 13 dealt with a proposed formation of Inter-Allied Committees to co-ordinate supply arrangements, one of the many attempts of the French to secure the pooling of the material resources of the Allies.

<sup>2</sup> On 20th Jan., in consequence of a report from General Plumer that he was about to take over an additional sector of defensive front in Italy, as any offensive in the mountains by the enemy seemed improbable (it was known that the German divisions which had taken part in the Caporetto campaign were being withdrawn), Sir Douglas Haig had written to the C.I.G.S. urging the return of the British divisions from Italy to France.

for mutual help, and he did not apprehend, when the time came to use them, that there would be any difficulty about agreement as to where reserves were most urgently required: further, even should a central authority be created, that authority would be equally unable to act until doubts as to the enemy's intentions had been dispelled.

On the 24th January, following on the issue of Joint Notes Nos. 12 and 14, the French, American and British Commanders-in-Chief met Generals Foch and Robertson at Compiègne, General Pétain's headquarters, in order to impart their views to the responsible military advisers of the two Governments before the Supreme War Council met to decide on future military policy. General Robertson opened the conference by suggesting that they should have a general statement on four points: the mutual support between Allied Armies, the location of the reserves, the question of troops for Italy, and the situation as to the transportation of the American Army.

The French and British Commanders-in-Chief explained their plans for defence, for local counter-offensives and for reciprocal help, both saying that they had about one-third of the forces in reserve. General Pétain stated that the French reserves would be at the disposal of Sir Douglas Haig, and he expected a similar arrangement to be made by the British: his reserves were so located that they could be started in any direction within twelve hours. Both Commanders-in-Chief, too, pointed out that their forces, already too weak for an offensive, or a counter-attack on a large scale, must necessarily, owing to lack of available reinforcements, grow smaller and that a number of divisions would have to be broken up during the year. The real reserve to the Western Front was, as General Robertson said, the American Army, and General Pershing thereupon drew attention to lack of shipping, the delays at the French ports, the shortage of railway transportation, and the backward state of the provision of equipment, munitions and aeroplanes. He aimed, he said, at having an American corps of four divisions in line or in reserve as soon as possible: but it would not be fit for offensive operations for some time yet: he hoped to have 18 divisions in France or in transit by July: he expected as a matter of course that the American Army would have its own front, and would not be used merely as a reserve to be sent here and there: he deprecated any amalgamation except of a purely provisional and temporary nature, definitely opposing

one with the French, on account of difficulties of language.<sup>1</sup>

General Foch's plan for bringing the expected German offensive to a halt was a powerful combined counter-offensive, but he admitted that he had not studied the details of such an operation; General Robertson gave it as his opinion that the enemy would not attack at many places at once, and that it did not seem possible to do more than prepare to support the Army which might be attacked, and be ready to counter-attack: the War could not be won by remaining on the defensive. It was the unanimous opinion of the conference that the French and British divisions should be brought back from Italy; but otherwise there was no real agreement. When Sir Douglas Haig made the remark, "Give us back the troops from "Salonika [where there were still 300,000 men] and we "will commence offensives", General Foch retorted, "We "were not speaking of offensives, but counter-offensives". Again when General Foch professed entire ignorance of the transportation and other difficulties which General Pershing had mentioned, General Pétain interjected, "One should "not wait until such things are brought to one's notice, "but should look around and discover them".

The conference therefore resulted only in a somewhat acrid interchange of views without any definite understanding as to real unity of action.

Whilst all these studies and discussions of the situation were going on and the military policy of the Allies remained unsettled, the British and French Intelligence branches had been bringing to notice that the German concentration on the Western Front was continuing at high speed. By the end of January the enemy's strength in France and Belgium was reported to have increased to 171 divisions,<sup>2</sup> besides an addition of 126 field and 100 heavy German batteries, with several Austrian: only three German divisions were remaining in Italy, the other four having been moved to the Western Front.<sup>3</sup> Intensive training for attack was

<sup>1</sup> Discussing this question later in the day with General Pershing, after a further talk with General Robertson, General Bliss was inclined to refer the matter of amalgamation to Washington. Whereupon General Pershing said that if they did so, "we would both be relieved from further duty in "France, and that is exactly what we should deserve". Pershing Experiences, p. 274.

<sup>2</sup> Gehre gives 172. Twelve had arrived during Jan.

<sup>3</sup> This was correct. Six divisions had taken part in the Caporetto offensive and a seventh had been sent to Italy on 11th Nov.

known to be going on behind the enemy's front in France and Belgium : various warnings had reached the Allies from outside sources that "a great blow to end the War" "was intended, and that it was already imminent and likely "to be struck in February".<sup>1</sup> The close observation maintained on the front showed that preparations were being pushed on along the whole line from Switzerland to the North Sea. In short, confirmatory evidence of the German intentions was so strong as to leave practically no doubt that a great attack would be made on the Western Front against the French or the British or both, and not on Italy ; and that it would be made in immense force before the American Army could interfere seriously and as soon as the preparations could be completed. At G.H.Q. it was calculated that the enemy preliminary measures and the concentration of troops would be sufficiently advanced for the attack to begin in March, but probably not earlier. The Military Representatives at Versailles thought a later date more probable. In either case it was evident that there was no time to lose if the great German concentration in progress was to be met by a corresponding concentration on the part of the Allies. The appropriate counter-action was the vital question awaiting the decision of the Supreme War Council, which, after a two months' interval, was to re-assemble on the 30th January.

<sup>1</sup> The King of Spain told the French Military Attaché in Madrid,  
" Vous allez avoir un gros coup à supporter, car l'Allemagne est décidée  
" à jouer sa dernière carte dans une offensive dont celle contre Verdun ne  
" peut vous donner qu'une faible idée. Si vous résistez pendant trois ou  
" quatre mois à cette poussée formidable, la partie est gagnée par vous, et  
" l'impuissance de l'Allemagne étant démontrée, le bloc des puissances  
" centrales s'effritera." Herbillon, p. 189, under date 4th Jan. 1918.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE DECISIONS OF THE SUPREME WAR COUNCIL ON FUTURE MILITARY POLICY AND THE ATTEMPT TO FORM A GENERAL RESERVE

Third Session of the Supreme War Council, 30th January to 2nd February 1918—The Proposals to Form a General Reserve—Extension of the British Line—Location of the German Attack—Reply to the Enemy's Peace Offer—The Executive War Board—Failure to Form a General Reserve—Fourth Session of the Supreme War Council, 14th and 15th March 1918—The Removal of Sir William Robertson from the post of Chief of the Imperial General Staff.

(Sketches 6, 7)

WHEN the Supreme War Council met at Versailles on the 30th January, after an interval of two months, for its Third Session, consideration of the recommendations contained in Joint Note No. 12 was the first business taken.<sup>1</sup> The general principle laid down in the Note, a co-ordinated defence from the North Sea to the Adriatic combined with preparations to seize every opportunity for counter-

<sup>1</sup> The members present were Mr. Lloyd George and Lord Milner (Minister without portfolio); M. Clemenceau and M. Pichon (French Foreign Minister); Signor Orlando and Baron Sonnino (Italian Foreign Minister); Mr. A. H. Frazier (First Secretary of the U.S.A. Embassy in Paris). In attendance were the Military Representatives and Sir Douglas Haig, Sir William Robertson, General Pétain, General Foch, General Pershing (after the first meeting) and General Alfieri (Italian Secretary of State for War).

It must be recorded that the two versions of the procès-verbaux, in French and English, of the meetings of the Supreme War Council, printed in parallel columns, do not exactly correspond. That of the meeting under consideration, for instance, begins as follows:—

M. Clemenceau ouvre la séance. Il indique l'ordre du jour : Plan de Campagne de 1918 ; Réserve Inter-Alliée ; commandement de cette réserve.

M. Lloyd George propose qu'on adopte la méthode du Parlement

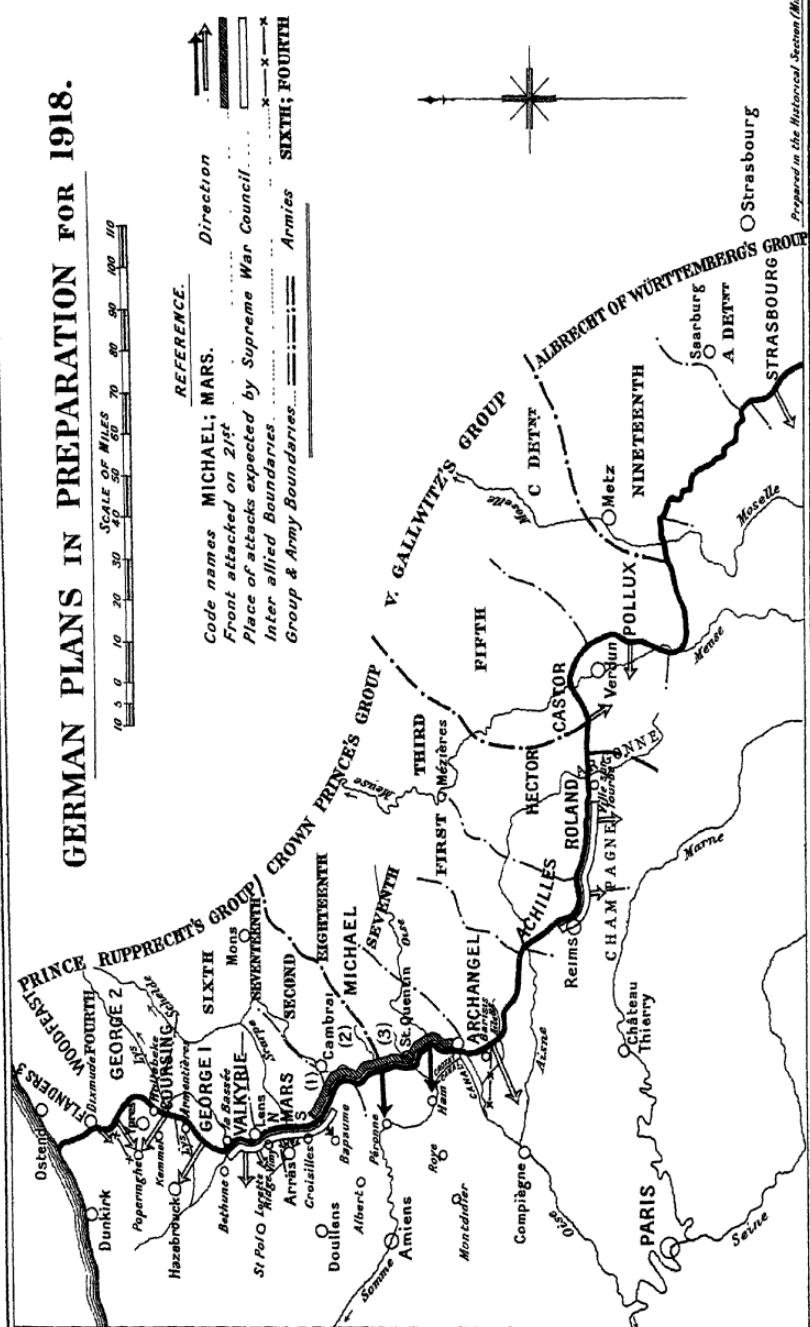
M. Clemenceau suggested that the S.W.C. should first consider Note 12 of the Military Representatives dealing with the general plan of operations.

Mr. Lloyd George concurred and suggested that this Note should be



*Sketch 6.*

## GERMAN PLANS IN PREPARATION FOR 1918.



offensive action, was accepted, and M. Clemenceau then called on the Chief of the French General Staff and the Commanders-in-Chief to speak. Whereupon General Foch delivered an address on the subject of what he called total or partial offensives. It was, however, pointed out by Sir Douglas Haig and General Pétain that, although they were in complete agreement with the principle of combining offensive with defensive action, they would not have available, so far as could be foreseen, the troops necessary for offensive operations on any formidable scale; for as the campaign proceeded their Armies would gradually grow less in numbers owing to lack of drafts to maintain them. General Pétain mentioned that he had already had to break up five divisions, and that he anticipated that between the 1st April and the 1st October he would be compelled to suppress 25 more, leaving 75. Field-Marshal Haig gave his forecast as a loss of 30 infantry divisions out of the 57 of the B.E.F. Both Commanders-in-Chief represented that if the American Army retained its autonomy in 1918, it would be of no use to the Allies except to hold some quiet sector of the line. Further, if the untried American divisions were placed together in the line in any number they would invite a heavy German attack.

Mr. Lloyd George expressed himself as completely bewildered by the calculations of losses, although he had been informed by Sir Douglas Haig, before the meeting, of the British and French figures, and, as M. Clemenceau interpolated, by General Pétain also, some time earlier. He asked, as he maintained he did not know how many men were really available for fighting in the different national Armies on both sides, that tables should be prepared showing the actual number of combatants in each, the number of men available as reserves for reinforcing them, the number of guns, and the strength of the Austro-German forces which would probably be left on the Eastern Front. The Council then adjourned to give the Secretariat time to put this information in the form desired.

On the re-assembly of the Council at 3 p.m. next day, the tables demanded by Mr. Lloyd George were laid before

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anglais, et qu'il soit procédé pour chaque question à deux lectures, etc.

given what English Parliamentary procedure would call a second reading, etc.

In one set of five consecutive pages, the French text contains 41 lines, the English 310; but sometimes the French text is fuller.

the members,<sup>1</sup> and this at once led to a lively argument between General Foch and the British Premier, the former insisting that Great Britain was not making the military effort of which she was capable : “ il en conclut à la ‘ nécessité pour l’Angleterre de faire de suite un grand ‘ effort pour exploiter les resources encore disponibles ”. Mr. Lloyd George, after explaining what the British Empire had done for the Allies, and showing that since the beginning of the battle of the Somme on the 1st July 1916 the British losses had been greater than those of any of the Allies, suggested that the discussion of the figures should be left to Ministers, and after a short adjournment the Council set about the examination of Joint Note No. 12. M. Clemenceau at once pointed out that, although the Note recommended an expedition against Turkey as the military policy—thus playing the tune called by the British Prime Minister—it was only on the condition that the effectives on the Western Front could be maintained : as this could not be done, the proposal automatically dropped. Mr. Lloyd George would not accept this view ; he held, he said, the opinion that the Western Front had always been over-insured : the Germans had maintained their front in the West with an inferiority of 2 to 3½ : knowing that they could not defeat us on the Western Front, they had successively attacked Serbia and Rumania, the weakest of the Allies : he was no longer hopeful, as he had been at one time, that the Germans could be driven back to the Rhine : there was nothing to be done but to force one of Germany’s Allies out of the War : he was not prepared to take troops from the Near East to bolster up the Western Front, and abandon conquests in Mesopotamia and Palestine : perhaps some men could be spared from Salonika : even should the Turkish

<sup>1</sup> These tables are not printed in the procès-verbaux of the meeting, and cannot be found. From what was said in the debate, it may be assumed that they showed that there were 171 German divisions on the Western Front opposed to 100 French and 57 British : that the Allies had a numerical superiority of 164,000 men, which would soon disappear, as some twenty or more German divisions might be expected : that, as regards reinforcements, the Germans had 950,000, enough to keep their divisions up to establishment in 1918, whereas the British and French had only 200,000 and 170,000, respectively, in prospect ; and 30 British and 25 French divisions would have to be broken up by the autumn.

On the Italian front there were, it was stated, 1,440,000 Allies (including 98,000 British and 185,000 French) opposed to 860,000 Austrians and Germans.

No Austrian divisions were included in the possible enemy total in France, as it had been learnt from an authoritative source that no large Austrian forces would be sent to the West.

campaign be abandoned, not more than two divisions would be freed. M. Clemenceau expressed his entire disapproval of the Eastern plan, and insisted that the security of the Western Front overrode all other considerations : his plan was to hold out in 1918, until American assistance was arrayed in full force.

The debate then drifted to the subject of the American Army, and General Bliss made a statement that there were in France five divisions : the British had undertaken to transport six : in February and March, on the original programme, three more would arrive ; and in the following five months, ten, so that by the end of August there would be 24, of which 18 would be effective.

At the third meeting, on the 1st February, the following resolution, agreed upon previously by the six Ministers representing France, Italy and Great Britain, with the reservation that no action in the East should be undertaken for two months,<sup>1</sup> was formally moved and accepted :—

The Supreme War Council accepts Joint Note No. 12 of the Military Representatives on the Plan of Campaign for 1918, the British Government having made it clear that, in utilizing in the most effective fashion the forces already at its disposal in the Eastern theatre, it has no intention of diverting forces from the Western Front or in any way relaxing its efforts to maintain the safety of that front, which it regards as a vital interest of the whole Alliance.

Sir William Robertson was then asked by the Chairman, M. Clemenceau, if he had anything to say, the French Minister no doubt relying on the British C.I.G.S. to condemn a plan which both he and General Foch disliked. Had General Robertson remained silent, it would have naturally been concluded that he did not object to the plan. He therefore made the statement, recorded in the proceedings, that the proposal of the Military Representatives to undertake "a definite offensive against Turkey, with a view to the annihilation of the Turkish Armies and the collapse of Turkish resistance" was not a practical plan, and to

<sup>1</sup> General Smuts left for Palestine early in February to discuss with the commanders on the spot the measures for eliminating Turkey from the War. His first report was dated 18th Feb. (See "Egypt and Palestine", Vol. II. p. 297.)

His advice was to the effect that the offensive campaigns in Palestine and Mesopotamia should not both be continued ; that he preferred the former, and that two divisions should be transferred from the latter to the former theatre. This was carried out.

attempt it would be very dangerous and detrimental to the prospects of winning the War.

A prolonged debate then ensued on the annexure to Joint Note No. 12,<sup>1</sup> on the general subject of the attitude to be taken up on the Western Front. This annexure may be summarized as a vaguely worded recommendation of the offensive-defensive, including a local counter-offensive, leading, if circumstances should permit, to an extensive and powerful offensive.

General Pétain argued that no offensive should be contemplated unless effectives were forthcoming, and that to combine the operations of all the Commanders-in-Chief there must be some general authority which would lay down where to attack, where to defend, when to attack and when to delay. The annexure was, with certain verbal emendations, accepted, the final and only important paragraph becoming :—

The Governments will have the plans and schemes [of the Commanders-in-Chief] sent to the Supreme War Council, which will ensure the co-ordination of their combined action, and will be equally entitled to take the initiative in any proposals with this object.

The Council then quickly dealt with Joint Notes Nos. 1 to 11, previously mentioned, approving of them all except No. 4 (Balkan problem), which was postponed, and No. 11 (on the subject of Chinese battalions), which was not accepted. In another formal resolution, they agreed that the several Governments should direct their respective General Staffs and Commanders-in-Chief to submit plans on the basis of Joint Notes Nos. 1 and 12.

Matters therefore stood for all practical purposes exactly where they had been two months earlier, and it was not until the afternoon sitting on the 1st February that the Council approached the new and serious business of the creation of a General Reserve as proposed in Joint Note No. 14.

On the desirability of having such a reserve there was unanimous agreement, provided it could be formed in addition to the reserves at the immediate disposal of Commanders-in-Chief and Army commanders. The first difficulty was to find the divisions required. Most of the Allied troops except those in Italy were required where they stood. An offensive against the Turks having been approved, subject only to no men being diverted from the

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 10.

Western Front, no divisions could be drawn from the Eastern theatres of war. It was therefore proposed to take troops from Italy, where, according to the tables presented to the Council, the Allied forces numbered 1,440,000 opposed to 860,000, almost entirely Austrian. The Italian Ministers, however, were averse to any weakening of their front. A second serious difficulty lay in the question of the command of the General Reserve : whether this should be exercised by a single commander or a committee ; how such a committee, if formed, should be composed ; and whether the controlling officer or body should perform the duties as regards the movement and operations of the General Reserve, which normally would be undertaken by the Commander-in-Chief of one of the fronts, or whether he or it should merely decide to which front the reserve should be sent, when this would pass under the command of the Commander-in-Chief of that front. Various solutions were suggested, which aimed at safeguarding the responsibilities of Governments and of Commanders-in-Chief. There seemed general agreement that the Military Advisers of each Government, that is, the Chiefs of the General Staffs, should be constituted into a committee for the sole purpose of deciding to whom and when the General Reserve, or part of it, should be assigned. General Bliss handed in a resolution to this effect. But eventually, after prolonged discussion, the following resolutions, proposed by Mr. Lloyd George,<sup>1</sup> were passed after some slight verbal amendments at the fifth meeting on the 2nd February :—

1. The Supreme War Council decides on the creation of a General Reserve for the whole of the Armies on the Western, Italian and Balkan fronts.
2. The Supreme War Council delegates to an Executive composed of the Permanent Military Representatives of Great Britain, Italy and the United States, with General Foch for France, the following powers to be exercised in consultation with the Commanders-in-Chief of the Armies concerned :
  - (a) to determine the strength in all arms and composition of the General Reserve, and the contribution of each national army thereto ;
  - (b) to select the localities in which the General Reserve is normally to be stationed ;
  - (c) to make arrangements for transportation and concentration of the General Reserve in the different areas ;

<sup>1</sup> They are given in English only in the procès-verbal. •

## THE VERSAILLES COUNCIL

- (d) to decide and issue orders as to the time, place and period of employment of the General Reserve: the orders of the Executive Committee for the movement of the General Reserve shall be transmitted in the manner and by the persons who shall be designated by the Supreme War Council for that purpose in each particular case;
- (e) to determine the time, place and strength of the counter-offensive, and then to hand over to one or more of the commanders-in-chief the necessary troops for the operation. The moment this movement of the General Reserve, or of any part of it, shall have begun, it will come under the orders of the commander-in-chief to whose assistance it is consigned;<sup>1</sup>
- (f) until the movement of the General Reserve begins, it will for all purposes of discipline, instruction and administration, be under the orders of the respective commanders-in-chief, but no movement can be ordered except by the Executive Committee.

3. In case of irreconcilable differences of opinion on a point of importance connected with the General Reserve, any Military Representative has the right to appeal to the Supreme War Council.

4. In order to facilitate its decisions, the Executive Committee has the right to visit any theatre of war.

5. The Supreme War Council will nominate the President of the Executive Committee from among the members of the Committee.

The Council then passed a resolution designating General Foch as President of the Executive Committee.

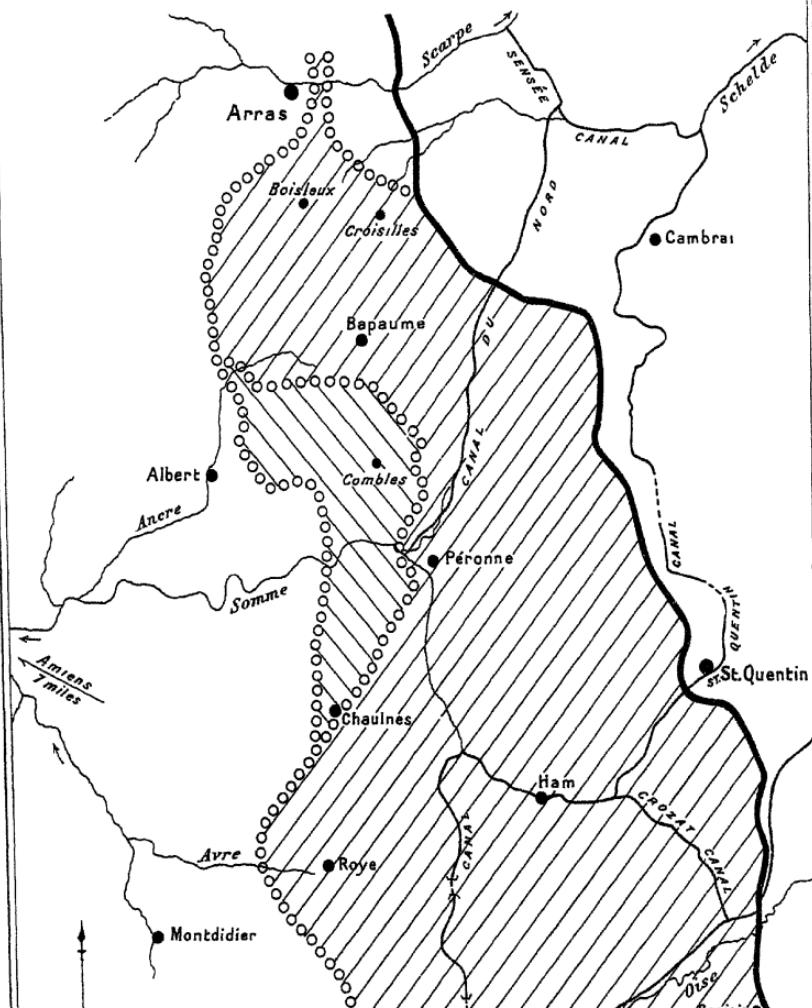
Joint Note No. 10, dealing with the extension of the British line, the decision on which had been reserved, was then discussed. It should, logically, have been taken earlier, but this was of little consequence, as the matter had already been settled by General Pétain and Sir Douglas Haig. The two Commanders-in-Chief stated the arguments both for and against an extension, but this was merely a formal proceeding, as the French general had already privately informed his British colleague that he would not worry ("taquiner") him further, the matter being now rather political—raised by M. Clemenceau in the hope of extorting more men from England—than

<sup>1</sup> Although this sub-section refers only to the "counter-offensive", it is evident from what was said during the debate that the General Reserve might similarly be handed over for defensive purposes.



Sketch 7.

## DEVASTATED AREA.



### REFERENCE.

Somme 1916 ..... / / / /  
German retreat to Hindenburg Line 1917 / / / /  
Front Line on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1918 ..... ——————

SCALE OF MILES.  
10 5 0 10 20

purely military. Mr. Lloyd George opposed further extension, pointing out that the French Army normally had 350,000 men on leave, whilst the British had only 70,000 (actually 80,000); but the Council in due course passed a resolution adopting Joint Note No. 10, "subject to the time and method of the extension being left for arrangement between General Pétain and Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig". The extension to the river Ailette thereby sanctioned was never demanded by General Pétain, and the junction of the British and French armies remained near Barisis.

Previous to the discussion on the extension of the British front, a paper, signed by General Sir Henry Wilson, with an Appendix dated 1st January 1918 (with a correction dated the 28th January), on the subject of "A German Offensive in France", and a map, had been circulated. In this paper it was calculated that on the 1st March the enemy would have a reserve of 58 divisions, and a total superiority of five over the Allied total of 163 (including six Belgian and two Portuguese, but excluding American), but an inferiority of nearly 600 heavy guns; that by the 1st July the enemy would have in reserve 96 divisions, and a superiority, in spite of counting in some American troops, of 87 divisions and 400 heavy guns; after this date the German total would remain stationary and the Allied total would rise by two American divisions a month. It was therefore considered by General Wilson that from a purely military point of view it would be best for the Germans to postpone their offensive until the 1st May. They would then have a superiority of about 20 divisions unless the Allies brought back troops from Italy or elsewhere. The correction to the original paper raised the total number of German divisions in reserve available for an offensive to a maximum of 110, which would be attained between the 1st May and the 1st June, and increased the front of attack from 48 to 55 kilometres.

General Wilson forecast "the most probable places for a hostile attack to develop" as

"(i) Between the La Bassée canal and the high ground south of the river Scarpe;  
"(ii) between Ville sur Tourbe and Reims;  
"(iii) about Lunéville (some 60 miles west of Strasbourg)".<sup>1</sup>

The devastated area over which the Germans had retired

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch 6. On the Supreme War Council map (i) and (ii) are indicated as alternatives.

in March 1917 was not considered liable to attack ;<sup>1</sup> the point of junction of the French and British forces, as such, was included in the list of fronts thought likely to be attacked, but was not mentioned further in the paper.

No discussion of this paper is recorded in the procès-verbaux of the meeting of the Council, but a reproduction of the map appears to have had a wide circulation.<sup>2</sup>

At the close of the meeting the advisability of transferring Italian troops to France as a solution of the difficulty of finding a General Reserve was again discussed, with no more result than the passing of a resolution remitting the study of the question to the Executive Committee.

After this disposal of the problems of future military policy the Ministerial members of the Supreme War Council, Mr. A. H. Frazier representing the United States, held a meeting at which a joint formal declaration, in reply to the enemy's peace offers, was framed. It was published on the 4th February and stated that the Allies would continue the War "with the utmost vigour and in the closest and "most effective co-operation".

A supplementary "Military Resolution" was also passed at this meeting, which ran, "The Supreme War "Council designates the respective Military Representatives "on the Executive Committee to transmit its orders to the "Armies of their several countries".<sup>3</sup>

The first meeting of the Executive Committee (the designation of which was immediately altered to "Executive War Board", as the control of a war by a committee, or for that matter by a council, seemed of bad omen) took place on the next day, and was followed by others on the 5th and 6th. Generals Foch, Bliss, Cadorna and Wilson found that agreement as to the number of divisions to be provided for the General Reserve by each Allied army was by no means an easy matter. General Foch, as President, endeavoured to get his own way and force the British to furnish the largest share of the General

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch 7.

<sup>2</sup> The paper had been discussed by General Wilson with Mr. Lloyd George and Lord Milner, and a war game played to exhibit its features, on the eve of the meeting.

<sup>3</sup> See later in this chapter for the constitutional effect of this decision. By it Ministers assumed the right to issue operation orders to the Armies, their channel of communication not being the General Staff, but the military representatives of a polyglot committee. It is an interesting speculation to imagine what would have happened in the Marne campaign in 1914 had such a system been in force then. As will be seen, in the critical days of March, no orders at all were issued from Versailles.

Reserve by declaring that the Belgians would relieve the two British divisions nearest to them, and finally, when the members were evenly divided, by claiming a casting vote, a claim in which he did not persist. On the third day the Board formulated its proposals in a joint note to the Commanders-in-Chief. In this, it was estimated that for the moment a General Reserve of 30 divisions would suffice. This amounted to only one seventh of the total number of British, French and Italian divisions, and it was pointed out that the ordinary proportion taken for reserves was usually one third or one fourth of a force. Thirty was therefore the lowest figure at which it could be put, and if this were decreased the General Reserve would be incapable of exercising any influence in a battle. The contribution of each of the Allied Armies was fixed in a table :—

	British Army	French Army	Italian Army
British Front . .	7 (perhaps 6) <sup>1</sup>	—	—
French Front . .	—	9 (perhaps 10) <sup>2</sup>	—
Italian Front . .	3	4	7
	10	13	7
		30	

The Note contained some explanation of the Board's views as to the disposal of the Reserve, and concluded by requesting the Commanders-in-Chief to take into consideration at once the proposals made to them, as it was very important that the General Reserve should be organized as soon as possible.

To this communication General Pétain replied on the 19th February, that, with these four divisions still in Italy, he could allot no more than eight divisions to the French front ; but he subsequently stated that he had none to spare for a General Reserve. General Diaz, in letters of the 21st and 23rd, consented to furnish six of the seven Italian divisions asked for ; but no reply was received from the British Commander-in-Chief. The Note did not, in fact, reach him until the 27th February. The explanation of this

<sup>1</sup> The higher figure was only to be taken on condition that the reconstituted Belgian Army could extend its front to the neighbourhood of Langemarck railway, which would free two British divisions.

<sup>2</sup> Including the 2 infantry divisions kept in reserve in the region of Dunkirk.

delay, given on the 2nd March at the meeting of the Executive War Board by the British Representative (General Sir Henry Rawlinson), was that General Wilson had intended to take the letter of the 6th February to Sir Douglas Haig personally, but had been called away to England the very day he intended to see the Field-Marshal.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Note of the Executive War Board, the eleven British and French divisions in Italy, which had temporarily been placed in the hands of the Italian High Command, were to be regarded as a part of the General Reserve; but from the point of view both of morale and of tightening the bonds of military fellowship between the Allied Armies, the Board considered it advantageous, as a matter of principle, to retain some of these divisions permanently in Italy.

According to the same Note, the divisions of each national Army allotted to the General Reserve should also as a matter of principle be placed in the zone of their own Army, with the British divisions near enough to the French front for rapid intervention there, and conversely the French divisions, whilst both French and British were to be ready for entrainment to go to the Italian front; and again, conversely, the Italian divisions in the General Reserve were to be prepared to move to the Western Front.<sup>2</sup>

The French and British divisions remaining in Italy were to be ready either to reinforce the Italian front or to act as covering troops on the Swiss-Italian frontier in case Swiss territory should be violated by the enemy.

Before any replies had been received to the Note, on the 15th February General Foch—on his personal initiative, as it subsequently transpired, and not as Chairman of the Executive War Board—telegraphed to the British War

<sup>1</sup> To General Rawlinson's explanation, according to the records, it should be added that on 8th Feb. General Wilson wrote a private letter to Sir D. Haig enclosing what he called "an advanced copy [it is undated "and unsigned] of a joint letter we [the Executive War Board] have "had drawn up", adding, "I want to come up on Tuesday [12th] if I "may and explain it". On the 9th, however, General Wilson was summoned to England, and went on the 10th; and he took no further action except to write another letter to Sir D. Haig postponing his visit. The Commander-in-Chief was also summoned to London, and crossed on the 9th, and during his stay took the opportunity of informing the Prime Minister that he would be unable to find six or seven divisions for the General Reserve. As General Wilson took no further action, he concluded the matter had been settled.

The reasons for these officers being summoned to London, and for General Rawlinson's presence at the Board, will be found below.

<sup>2</sup> The average time taken by British divisions for the journey to Italy, each requiring 60 trains, was 14 days.

Cabinet that, "as the British front appears to be more immediately threatened and the British are weakest in reserves, two British divisions should immediately be brought back to France from Italy, to be followed later by two French divisions". This recommendation was immediately repeated by the C.I.G.S. to Sir Douglas Haig, who was informed, as an alternative, that Italy might be asked to send four Italian divisions, a course which the Prime Minister considered preferable. This latter suggestion the Commander-in-Chief at once declined, and two British divisions were ordered to return to France as part of the General Reserve.<sup>1</sup>

On the receipt by Sir Douglas Haig on the 27th February of the official letter of the Executive War Board containing the Note on the formation of the General Reserve, he replied on the 2nd March as follows :—

I have to make the following observation :—An enemy offensive appears imminent on both the English and French fronts. To meet this attack I have already disposed of all the troops at present under my command, and if I were to earmark six or seven divisions from these troops the whole of my plans and dispositions would have to be remodelled. This is clearly impossible, and I therefore regret that I am unable to comply with the suggestion conveyed in the Joint Note.

The Field-Marshal then explained that the situation did not admit of the forces in reserve being definitely located in any particular area until the enemy's intentions were further developed : on existing indications any one of the Armies was liable to be attacked, and might require the whole of its resources : he reminded the War Board that he had made arrangements with the French Commander-in-Chief for mutual support, viz. : "for the rapid despatch of from six to eight British divisions, with a proportionate amount of artillery and subsidiary services" to the assistance of the French, with reciprocal action for relief or intervention by French troops on the British front :<sup>2</sup> as regards an extension of the Belgian front, it was for the moment inadvisable, but it might be studied, and could be discussed with the Belgian authorities.

The Commander-in-Chief forwarded to the War Office a

<sup>1</sup> The divisions selected were the 41st and 7th, and they were ordered to begin their move about 25th Feb. A few days later the transfer of the 7th was cancelled ; the movement of the 41st Division was not completed until 18th March, after which its reorganization into a 9-battalion division was carried out and it was allotted to the Third Army area.

<sup>2</sup> The details of the arrangements are given later.

copy of the Executive War Board's Note and his reply. After some correspondence on the subject between the War Cabinet and the Board, a meeting of the Supreme War Council was held in London on the 14th–15th March, to decide what was to be done. By that time the situation on the Western Front had developed so far that the Germans had 89 divisions in line and immediate reserve, with some dozen others available, opposite the British front (held by 40 divisions in the line, with 18 in reserve). There could no longer be any doubt of the imminence of an attack against the British by very superior forces, possibly combined with a simultaneous attack against the French.<sup>1</sup> It was therefore unanimously agreed by the Members of the Council that any decision as to the quota for the General Reserve to be furnished by Sir Douglas Haig must be postponed, M. Clemenceau pointing out that, similarly, no division could be withdrawn from General Pétain. He added that “l'accord le plus complet existe entre le Maréchal Haig et le Général Pétain, qui ont pris toutes dispositions pour se prêter un mutuel appui en cas de besoin”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> According to the French situation map dated 17th March forwarded to British G.H.Q., the distribution of the German divisions was as follows :—

Opposite Belgians, including coast defence	.	.	.	.	.	8
", British (100 miles)	.	.	.	.	.	65
", French from British right to St. Mihiel Salient (inclusive, 175 miles)	.	.	.	.	.	62
", French from St. Mihiel to Swiss frontier (150 miles)	.	.	.	.	.	22
Reserve, central	.	.	.	.	.	2
", positions unknown	.	.	.	.	.	26
						— 28
						185

The British Intelligence map for the 15th March 1918 shows :—

Opposite Belgians	.	.	8 (3 in reserve);
", British	.	.	89 (44, " , );
", French	.	.	89 (88, " , );
Unlocated	.	.	6

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<sup>2</sup> On 24th Feb., M. Clemenceau told Sir Douglas Haig that he would get rid of (écartier) Foch gradually, and that he personally looked upon a close agreement between the British Commander-in-Chief and General Pétain as the surest guarantee of success.

Every week from 23rd Dec. 1917 onwards General Pétain sent Sir Douglas Haig, for his personal use only, a secret situation map, of which only three other copies were distributed : one each to the President of the Republic, Maréchal Joffre and General Foch. Similar information was supplied by Sir D. Haig to General Pétain and the British Representative at Versailles.

General Pétain's map at the time showed that west of Soissons there were only seven French divisions, excluding cavalry, in reserve, with an Army and a corps headquarters free to take command of them.

The Council, however, clung to the principle of forming a General Reserve as soon as it was possible, and, after a debate, a series of resolutions on the subject, drafted by Mr. Lloyd George, were agreed on. They were to the effect that the principle of the creation of a General Reserve was maintained : that the proposals in the Joint Note of the Executive War Board on the subject required modification : that the British and French divisions now on the Italian front should form the nucleus of this Reserve, reinforced by a quota of Italian divisions to be determined by the Board, which for this purpose was to have the assistance of a committee of general officers : this new committee was also to help the Board to decide whether the immediate transfer to the Western Front of some of the General Reserve thus formed in Italy was desirable.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the Permanent Military Representatives of the Council were to prepare a plan for supporting the Italian Army in the event of a further enemy offensive against its front.

With some bitterness General Foch remarked that the Executive War Board had existed only to chatter, and might as well be dissolved ; whilst M. Clemenceau reproved the Board for not having considered the question of the employment of Italian troops on the Western Front. It appeared in the course of the debate at the Supreme War Council on the 15th March that General Pétain had communicated the details of his arrangements for assisting the British Armies in case of need personally to General Foch alone, and that the information had not been passed on formally either to Sir Douglas Haig or to the Military Representatives and the Executive War Board. The Supreme War Council then decided that "the agreement "arrived at between the Commanders-in-Chief of the Allied "Armies in France for mutual support should be communicated formally to the Permanent Military Representatives "at Versailles". There is no record that this was ever done.<sup>2</sup> In 3½ months, therefore, the Supreme War Council, with its ancillary organs, the Permanent Military Repre-

<sup>1</sup> It may be added that at a meeting in Turin on 20th March, the Committee (composed of Generals Rawlinson, Maistre, Giardino and Bliss) advised the movement to France at once of two Italian divisions, two French and one British, in that order ; but the Italian Government raised objections. Nothing had been done when the German offensive opened, but subsequently the five divisions were despatched to France.

<sup>2</sup> The next meeting of the Military Representatives did not take place until 23rd March, when the subjects discussed were the reinforcement of the Italian line, a military expedition to North Russian ports, and the reinforcement of the British Army by American troops.

sentatives, Executive War Board, and Committee of General Officers, had done nothing tangible towards meeting the imminent German assault ; and the Council was not to meet again until the 1st May.<sup>1</sup>

During the period dealt with in this chapter, some very important changes took place among the holders of high appointments in the British Army. Long before the end of 1917, it had become very evident that the Prime Minister preferred the advice of General Sir Henry Wilson, the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Command (in England), to that of his responsible military councillor, the C.I.G.S., General Sir William Robertson. The creation of the Permanent Military Representatives in Versailles (from which it was arranged to exclude the Chiefs of the General Staffs of the Allied Armies) enabled an important rôle in the conduct of affairs to be officially bestowed on General Wilson. As a result, in January 1918 the situation became so acute that the Secretary of State for War, Lord Derby, felt compelled to hint that he would be obliged to resign if either the Commander-in-Chief in France or the C.I.G.S. was removed from his appointment. When the Executive War Board was formed, Mr. Lloyd George managed to override General Bliss's proposal that the Board should be formed of the Chiefs of the General Staffs, and to substitute a resolution that its members should be the Military Representatives; he placed General Foch on it, however, by specially nominating him. The acceptance of this resolution, and of the supplementary one empowering the Executive Board to "transmit" orders to the Armies of the Allies through their Military Representatives, though satisfactory as strengthening General Wilson's personal position, raised in England a constitutional question. The decisions appeared to conflict with the exercise by the Army Council of the powers and responsibilities entrusted to them by law and constitutional usage. The War Office, therefore, made strong representations to the War Cabinet on the subject, in which the Colonial Office was also interested on behalf of the Dominions. It was pointed out that the Executive War Board would be invested with powers over the British Forces in France, Italy and the Balkans, although it had no constitutional responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> The Council at its meeting on 14th-15th March, besides discussing the question of the General Reserve, passed resolutions with regard to aerial reprisals, the requisition and employment of Dutch shipping, and the creation of an Inter-Allied Transportation Council.

for their safety : it was considered that the arrangement placed the Commanders-in-Chief in an impossible position and deprived the Army Council of the responsibility entrusted to them by Act of Parliament. Sir Douglas Haig was summoned by the Secretary of State for War to London, where he arrived on the afternoon of the 9th February, in order that the Prime Minister might consult him. He gave it as his opinion that only the Army Council or a Field-Marshal senior to him could give him orders, and that those of the Executive War Board might not be lawful. He suggested the reconsideration of Sir William Robertson's proposal, viz. : that the C.I.G.S., after consultation with General Foch, who had practically been made generalissimo, should issue orders to the British Commander-in-Chief. Mr. Lloyd George said that he had come to the same conclusion, and proposed to make Sir Henry Wilson C.I.G.S. and send Sir William Robertson to Versailles. The Commander-in-Chief at once mentioned the distrust in which General Wilson was held by the Army, and the Prime Minister then saw a solution of all difficulties in the appointment of Sir Douglas Haig himself to be generalissimo, in London, of all the British Forces ; but the Field-Marshal gave it as his opinion that no change should suddenly be made in the command in France, where he knew every detail of the situation, in such a grave emergency as was obviously present. After further discussion, a formula was arrived at and committed to paper, which was to the effect that the Military Representative at Versailles was to be "absolutely "free and unfettered in the advice he gives, but he is to "report to the C.I.G.S. the nature of the advice given "for information of the Cabinet, and the C.I.G.S. will "advise the Cabinet thereon". That evening Lord Milner telephoned to General Wilson to come to London, and on his arrival there next day informed him of what had happened.<sup>1</sup>

The Prime Minister now put on paper the final arrangement which he proposed, and it was communicated to both General Robertson and General Wilson. The principal items were that (1) the powers of the C.I.G.S. were to be reduced to what they had been before the Order in Council

<sup>1</sup> Wilson's diary (Wilson, ii. p. 58) states he was told by Lord Milner that Mr. Lloyd George had three plans, namely :—

- (1) Send Robertson to York and replace him by Plumer ;
- (2) Send Robertson to York and replace him by Haig, replacing Haig by Plumer ;
- (3) Send Robertson to Versailles, making Wilson C.I.G.S.

of 27th January 1916,<sup>1</sup> so that he would no longer "be "responsible for issuing the orders of the Government in "regard to military operations"; (2) the C.I.G.S. would continue to be the supreme military adviser of the Government; (3) the Military Representative at Versailles was to be a member of the Army Council; (4) as prompt decisions would have to be taken as to the movement of the General Reserve, full powers must be given to the Military Representatives to give the necessary orders; and (5) the Military Representative at Versailles was to be Sir William Robertson and the C.I.G.S. to be Sir Henry Wilson.

Matters were not, however, by any means settled, as the Prime Minister appears to have had no support in the removal of Sir William Robertson except from Lord Milner, whom he now proposed to make Secretary of State for War, sending Lord Derby as Ambassador to Paris. Sir Herbert Plumer was asked to become C.I.G.S., but, disagreeing with the scheme for the command of the reserves, he declined. It was suggested that General Wilson should be appointed Deputy C.I.G.S., but this neither suited him nor the C.I.G.S. General Robertson, on principle, declined to agree to any arrangement by which the Military Representative, and not the C.I.G.S., had control of the reserves, and denounced the scheme as "unworkable and dangerous".<sup>2</sup> The Government therefore decided on the supersession of General Robertson. On the 16th February, without his knowledge, the Official Press Bureau issued a notice that the Government had accepted Sir William Robertson's resignation as C.I.G.S.; on the 18th, General Wilson was ordered to assume the duties of C.I.G.S., and General Robertson to take over from him the Eastern Command, which had been vacant since the former had gone to Rapallo.

After consultation with Sir Douglas Haig, General Sir Henry Rawlinson was appointed Military Representative at Versailles, Sir Herbert Plumer returning to France to resume command of the Second (temporarily called the Fourth) Army, and Lieut.-General Lord Cavan, in Italy with the XIV. Corps, taking command of the British troops there. In the sequel it will be found that the General Reserve did not materialize, and the powers bestowed on

<sup>1</sup> See "1916", Vol. I. p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> The difficulty was got over, when General Rawlinson at the end of March ceased to be the Military Representative, by sending a comparatively junior officer to Versailles. To him General Wilson as C.I.G.S. gave orders over a direct telephone line.

the Executive War Board were never exercised. When on the 26th March General Foch was placed in control and subsequently in command of the Allied Forces, the Supreme War Council, and its ancillary committees continued to meet; they performed important political and administrative work, but without attempting to interfere in the management of military operations.

Sir William Robertson had never been able to gain the confidence of the Prime Minister; he had consistently given support to Sir Douglas Haig; he had constantly urged the organization of man-power on a proper footing; he had successfully led the opposition to schemes for winning the War in the East; and he had accurately forecast the dangers of not strengthening the Western Front to the utmost. During his two and a quarter years' tenure of the post of C.I.G.S., he had done most important work in organizing and establishing the position of the General Staff, and in co-ordinating the direction and control of the War as a whole.

The General Staff had been created only a few years before 1914, and for the first year and a half of the War that part of it at the War Office in London—a make-shift organization, as most of the holders of appointments in Whitehall in August, 1914, had gone to France—had either been ignored or allowed to sink into insignificance. Re-established—improvised, in fact—at the end of 1915, when General Robertson was brought from being Chief of the General Staff in France to be the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, it henceforth efficiently and effectively discharged its duties. Gradually it disentangled the confusion into which, as a result of defective direction and control, the operations in the various British theatres of war had been allowed to fall. The accurate intelligence gathered as regards the enemy forces and intentions; the consistent and carefully considered advice which the General Staff tendered to Ministers—whose anxiety to hasten the conclusion of the War, and at the same time to avoid heavy losses, and particularly to evade fighting Germans, was only natural—coupled with its sound appreciation of strategical requirements, as shown by the subsequent course of events, paved the way to the victory which was to be achieved later. The success of Sir William Robertson's methods in another way is indicated by the loyal and helpful relations which invariably subsisted between the General Staff at the War Office and the G.H.Q.'s of all Armies in the field, without

exception—a state of affairs which is by no means common in the stress and turmoil of a great war.

His disability—and in that he does not stand alone among great soldiers, who deal with crude force and not with rhetoric—lay in his lack of outward grace ; the total absence of any power of persuasion, save a blunt and often rough statement of opinion; and a complete inability either to understand the minds of civilian statesmen, his masters, or to make clear to them what he considered the mere elements of sound strategy, with which every educated man, he thought, must be familiar.

## CHAPTER V

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SITUATION ON THE WESTERN FRONT FROM THE BEGINNING OF FEBRUARY TO THE EVE OF THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE.

Development of the G.H.Q. Plan—Sir Hubert Gough's letter to G.H.Q. and Army Conference—G.H.Q. Appreciation of the Situation—G.H.Q. Instructions sent to the Fifth Army—Progress of Defensive Arrangements on the Whole Front—Arrangements for Co-operation between the British, French and Belgian Armies—Continued German Concentration on the Western Front—Sir Douglas Haig's Views given at an Army Commanders' Conference—Intelligence Evidence of Imminence of Attack on the Fifth and Third Armies.

(Map 1 ; Sketches A, 5, 7, 8, B)

THE decisions taken by the Supreme War Council at its session 30th January-2nd February had finally disposed of any hope that the Western Front might be reinforced from the Eastern theatres of war. It had also been made clear that if any divisions were transferred from Italy before a German offensive was launched, they would be placed in the General Reserve and would not be at the disposal of the Commanders-in-Chief. Even French pressure had not induced the British Prime Minister to alter the distribution of man-power available in England, so as to complete the reinforcements required by the Army in France. Moreover, the British Commander-in-Chief had now to reckon with the possibility of being ordered to find six or seven divisions for the General Reserve. On the other hand, thanks to General Pétain, he had no longer to fear demands for a further extension of his front. In consequence, early in February Sir Douglas Haig decided on certain modifications of his defensive plans and the distribution of his troops.

In view of the very superior number of men and guns which the enemy might concentrate against any part of the

British front, of the probable long duration of the battle, and of the lack of men to replace losses,<sup>1</sup> it was to be expected that the endurance of the four Armies, if the main weight of the attack fell on them, would be taxed to the utmost in holding their ground until reinforcements could be brought from the French front or from the General Reserve, if ever the latter came into existence. North of the Scarpe, where the front line lay only just over fifty miles from the Channel coast, there was no room for any "elastic defence", nor for a series of delaying actions; time could be gained only by hard fighting and stubborn resistance. South of the Scarpe there was some space for manœuvre; provided the French left stood fast and the important railway centre at Amiens remained securely guarded, the Fifth Army and the right of the Third Army might be permitted to give ground, if this became necessary, without uncovering any vital point. It was obvious too that in the southern area, French assistance might reasonably be expected to be forthcoming without delay, and in any case French reinforcements could be brought to the British right wing near the Oise in far less time than would be required to transport them to the left wing in Flanders, right across an existing system of communications. All therefore pointed to keeping the centre and left strong at the expense of the Fifth Army on the front recently taken over. Accordingly much of Sir Douglas Haig's thought was given to settling the best allotment, in this sense, of the forces at his disposal. His decision to adhere to this plan naturally led to considerable discussion and correspondence with General Gough.

Both at Versailles, as we have seen, and at French G.Q.G., it was thought that the enemy's offensive would not take place until well on in the spring, for the reason that the Russian situation might delay the execution of the German plan;<sup>2</sup> while, apart from that possibility, by

<sup>1</sup> According to War Office forecasts, the drafts for April would number only 18,000 men.

<sup>2</sup> The peace negotiations at Brest Litovsk had not resulted at this date in any settlement between Russia and the Central Powers, and at the end of January a general strike of workers all over Germany, as a protest against the harsh terms demanded, had taken place, and had been put down only by military force of arms.

It must be borne in mind that by the beginning of 1918 public opinion in Germany was sharply divided: the aristocratic classes, army officers, land owners and big industrialists looking forward to a peace by conquest with annexations; whilst the larger middle-class and workers' parties desired peace as soon as possible, by understanding and without annexations; for

waiting until May or June, there would be a wider choice of objectives, as the ground in Flanders would then be fit for operations, and conditions in Italy more favourable. This opinion was not shared at G.H.Q. in France, nor by the General Staff in London. There it was held that the internal state of Germany and of the countries allied to her, combined with the time limitation imposed on her plans by the growing strength of the American Army, would force the enemy to begin operations in March. The first attacks might well be of a preparatory nature only, aimed rather at using up the Allied reserves than at immediate decisive success ; but it was considered that a greater effort might follow later, when, given a dry spring, the ground should be fit for operations even early in April.<sup>1</sup>

There were strong arguments in favour of the view that the enemy would choose to make his decisive effort against the British front. There could be no reasonable doubt that, in the limited time still available to him, he must attempt to gain such results as would convince either France or Great Britain, or both, that it would be wiser to make peace than to hold on until the American Armies were ready to fight. There could no longer be any wide sweeping victory of the type contemplated in the Schlieffen Plan of 1914 ; for under existing conditions an advance could not be carried very far without a pause.

Two main objectives seemed at G.H.Q. to present themselves to the enemy, either Paris or the Channel ports. The capture of the capital would exercise an enormous effect in France, although it might not necessarily entail the decisive defeat of the French Armies ; the latter might still be able to recuperate behind the Loire and come to the help of Sir Douglas Haig, if the Germans were then to turn against him. An attack towards the Channel ports would, if successful, be disastrous for the British Armies, and, moreover, would give the enemy such a measure of control over the English Channel as might go

an imperialist peace would only perpetuate a form of Government in which they had no share.

Before an agreement with the Bolshevik leaders was reached, Germany found it necessary to resume hostilities (on 18th February) and advance eastwards in order to bring the Russians to a sense of realities, peace being signed on 3rd March.

<sup>1</sup> As will be seen, Ludendorff intended to win the war by a single operation ; only when this failed did he try to prepare for a final effort by subsidiary attacks designed to use up the Allied reserves and draw them from the British area.

far towards crippling the sea-borne traffic on which the existence of England depended. Paris lay at a distance of some eighty miles from the nearest part of the German front, beyond the reach of a single offensive, and during an advance on the capital strong forces would be required to secure the right flank and the communications against attack by the British. To reach the Channel ports the distance to be traversed was only fifty miles, and long before this had been covered the ports could be rendered practically unusable by gun-fire and bombing. The British, wedged in a narrow space, unable to escape and cut off from supplies, could then be dealt with at leisure; in addition, the flanks of the attack during the operation would be fairly safe, the right being on the sea<sup>1</sup> and the left guarded by a series of strong river lines against any efforts of the French to come to the assistance of their Ally. Of the two possibilities, therefore, the objective of the Channel ports seemed the more likely to appeal to the Germans, and it was the one which promised to require less time for its attainment. If such were the plan, it seemed to G.H.Q. that the Germans would no doubt employ only part of their reserve in any preliminary operation against the southern part of the British front—aiming at limited objectives, such as the capture of the Flesquières Salient and perhaps Vimy Ridge. After that, when the British reserves had been used up, they would be able to develop their main effort further north with increased prospects of success.

Sir Douglas Haig's plans were therefore so designed that he might be ready to meet a great attack in Flanders at short notice, being prepared at the same time to deal with an attack against the Fifth and Third Armies between the Oise and the Scarpe, until reinforcements could reach them.

**Sketch 5.** During February three divisions (the 18th, 66th and 20th) were transferred from the Fourth Army (in the Ypres sector) to the Fifth Army, and to these in the first part of March was added a fourth, the 50th. XIX. Corps headquarters (Lieut.-General Sir H. E. Watts) was also sent there in February, the XIX. Corps (24th and 66th Divisions) being interpolated in the line between the VII. and XVIII.

There were also sent to the Fifth from the other Armies: two Army brigades R.F.A.; ten brigades R.G.A.; nine unbrigaded siege batteries; one anti-aircraft battery and

<sup>1</sup> Measures would of course have to be taken by means of heavy artillery and submarines to prevent interference by the British Navy.

24 R.E. companies and units ; and the air arrangements desired were made.<sup>1</sup>

The situation on the Fifth Army front had been described in a report sent to G.H.Q. on the 1st February by its commander<sup>2</sup> immediately after the completion of the relief of the French up to Barisis, and his visit to General Pétain's headquarters, where he had a long discussion as to arrangements for French assistance with General Anthoine, now Chief of the Staff, an old friend of Passchendaele days. General Gough first drew the attention of G.H.Q. to the fact that the presence of General von Hutier,<sup>3</sup> who, as is now definitely known, was accompanied by his Chief of Staff, General von Sauberzweig, had been ascertained on the Fifth Army front ; he also emphasized the various signs of the mounting of an attack. The probability was, he thought, in view of the state of the ground further north and the natural desire of the Germans to obtain an early decision, that the blow would fall against the Fifth Army. Of his 40-mile front, he considered that a serious attack was unlikely on the southern twelve miles owing to the natural difficulties of marsh and stream in front of his line where it ran northward across and along the Oise,<sup>4</sup> but that the rest of the front might well be the object of a heavy hostile offensive : whether he could meet this successfully would depend on the length of the notice of attack which he might obtain : he had only eight divisions in the line : it would take 48 hours to put in two more, drawn from his own reserve, and 96 hours for two more to arrive from G.H.Q. reserve, as the latter was then situated : from the methods adopted in recent German offensives, he anticipated that the preliminary bombardment would be short, possibly only six hours, and that the

Sketch A.

<sup>1</sup> See page 118.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix II.

<sup>3</sup> He was to command the new *Eighteenth Army*. General von Hutier's presence was more than significant in that he had lately commanded the remarkably successful German attack on Riga. It was first reported on 5th Jan., when he was correctly said to have taken over the sector south of the German *Second Army*. This was confirmed by two obituary notices in German newspapers, signed by him, of a general and an airman who were known to have fallen on General Gough's front.

General von Hutier had commanded the *2nd Guard Division* in France in 1914 ; when the *Guard Corps* went to Russia in April 1915, he was promoted to the command of the *XXI. Corps* there, and in April 1917, the *Eighth Army*. The features of his offensive at Riga, Sept. 1917, were that all troops for the attack were kept over seventy miles back and their approach marches were not begun until ten days before the attack ; and that this was preceded by only five hours' bombardment (first two hours, gas only) without any previous registration by heavy guns or trench mortars.

<sup>4</sup> See on page 96, however, the instructions given by him on 3rd Feb. to his subordinate commanders.

greatest efforts would be made to effect surprise : such an attack he could not be sure of defeating with only eight divisions : the low strength of the Army and the poor state of the defences would go far towards ensuring success to the enemy : although everything was being done to improve the defences of the Fifth Army area, he did not expect them to be satisfactory north of the Omignon (abreast of St. Quentin) before the middle of March, or good before the end of that month : between the Oise and the Omignon, he thought he might be ready to fight a defensive battle in about a month's time : the size of the area with which he had to deal, the absence of accommodation behind his front, the bad condition of the roads,<sup>1</sup> the lack of light railways, and the shortage of labour, workshops and general facilities all tended to delay defence work. He asked for more Royal Engineers, more labour, more stores, also for an additional scout squadron from the Royal Flying Corps, and for daily reports from the strategic air squadrons at the disposal of G.H.Q. as to the situation in the belt of ground for forty miles beyond his front : if all his requirements could be satisfied, he considered that the whole of the Battle and Rear Zones could be made into a good defended area by the 15th March : as soon as these zones had been prepared, he proposed to put all available labour on preparing a position east of the Somme from about Ham to the high ground west of Moislains (5 miles north of Péronne), with the object of securing the crossings over the river.

General Gough's appreciation of the situation was made even clearer by the explanation which he put before his subordinate commanders at a conference on the 3rd February, when he gave definite warning that the main enemy attack was to be expected on the front of the Fifth and Third Armies, with Amiens as the objective, basing his view on the presence of General von Hutier ; on the evident preparations in hand ; and on good divisions having been withdrawn from the front for training, as had happened in the Riga offensive, and replaced by others of poorer quality, which accounted for the front being abnormally quiet. Actually, however, within eighty miles of St. Quentin, he said, there were 64 divisions in the line and 39 divisions in reserve, 56 others in reserve in France and

<sup>1</sup> Much work had been, and was being, done by the Director of Roads (under the Director-General of Transportation) on the communications in the devastated area captured from the enemy in 1916-17, but movement off the few main roads was not possible in winter.

available to reinforce an offensive. He emphasized the necessity for defence in depth, frequent raids,<sup>1</sup> great alertness, and every measure to prevent surprise, and asked that it should be impressed on all subordinate commanders that, as the Battle of Riga was begun by forcing the passage of the Dwina (a river averaging a quarter of a mile wide and unfordable), they must not regard the sector of the line guarded by the Oise as immune against attack.

In view of the admitted difficulties with which General Gough had to contend and the impossibility of meeting his request for additional labour without detriment to preparations on the greater, and more vital, part of the front, it was at first argued at G.H.Q. that it might be advisable forthwith to concentrate all labour available in the Fifth Army on the construction of a line of resistance behind the devastated area, which the enemy would then have to cross Sketch 7, before he could develop his attack.<sup>2</sup> The weight of argument, however, was against such a course. There were many obvious objections, moral and material, to giving up ground before the need to do so was beyond doubt.

In reply to General Gough's letter, G.H.Q. on the 4th Map 1. Sketch A. February forwarded to him a memorandum entitled "The "Principles of Defence on the Fifth Army Front" and on the 9th February a letter of instructions.<sup>3</sup> In the former it was pointed out that the problem as to which line should be held was mainly one of communications, since the state of the latter in the devastated area rendered any determined defence of the Battle and Rear Zones difficult, as long as the means to make these really efficient were not available : it was for consideration whether the main resistance should not be made behind the line of the Somme : this would ease the communication problem, but the battle would be fought with the devastated area immediately in rear of the defensive position : Péronne, in any case, should be held by a bridgehead, in view of the importance of the crossings and the communications near and in the town. But, continued the memorandum, it was considered better to fight

<sup>1</sup> During the period of waiting some divisions instituted a monthly cup for competition between battalions, marks being given as follows : identifications from killed, 1 point ; prisoner or deserter, 2 points ; machine gun or trench mortar, 3 points.

<sup>2</sup> As an example of the troops and labour units attached to Armies, those with the Fifth Army are given in a Note at end of Chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Appendices 12 and 13. The memorandum was signed by Major-General J. H. Davidson, General Staff, and the letter by Lieut.-General Hon. H. A. Lawrence, Chief of the General Staff.

east of the Somme, and, as a precaution in case they were forced back to the river, an emergency zone should be constructed along the line of the Somme and the Tortille (which flows southward into the Somme near Péronne):<sup>1</sup> it should be connected by a switch to the existing defensive zones north of Péronne, which should include and secure the high ground at Mont St. Quentin (just north of Péronne): further, in order to give the bridgehead at Péronne sufficient size to cover the crossings, a switch should be constructed from the existing Rear Zone near Marquaix (6 miles east of Péronne) to a point in the emergency zone, half-way between Ham (11 miles north of Noyon) and Péronne: finally the possibility of having to execute a withdrawal should receive careful consideration, and detailed plans for it should be worked out.

General Gough therefore assumed that the policy of the Fifth Army was to fight east of the Somme, but to be prepared in case of necessity to fall back to the line of that river. The suggestion as regards forming a bridgehead around Péronne and an emergency zone along the Somme seemed to him merely a counsel of perfection, for there was no labour available for their construction.

The G.H.Q. instructions of the 9th February defined the policy more precisely.<sup>2</sup> In the event of a serious attack, the commander of the Fifth Army was told that his policy should be "to secure and protect at all costs the important "centre of Péronne and the river Somme to the south of "that place, whilst strong counter-attacks [against the "flanks of the attacking enemy] should be made both from "the direction of Péronne and from the south, possibly "assisted by the French Third Army": an attack was in the first instance to be met on the front at present held, but the battle was not to be fought out there by throwing in reinforcements or making counter-attacks to regain lost ground, unless the general situation at the time rendered such a course advisable: "it may well be desirable", said the instructions, "to fall back to the rearward defences of "Péronne and the Somme, whilst linking up with the Third "Army on the north and preparing for counter-attack". The suggestions in the memorandum as regards the Péronne bridgehead and the emergency zone along the Somme were repeated: if it was judged expedient to give ground, the line along the Crozat canal and southward in front of the

<sup>1</sup> The suggested defences are indicated on Sketch 8.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 18.

Rear Zone, was to be held "at all costs" in order to secure the left of the main Battle Zone of the French, which prolonged the Fifth Army Rear Zone : north of the Crozat canal, retirement might be made to the Rear Zone : to keep connection with the Third Army if a retirement were made, the necessary switches were to be constructed. Finally, General Gough was told that arrangements were being made to send him "the necessary labour and transportation".

Between the 2nd February and the 16th March the total effective strength of the labour with the Fifth Army rose from 24,217 to 48,154, of which 15 per cent were resting each day. The bulk of the labour units was employed on work connected with roads, light and normal gauge railways, quarries, forests, depots, dumps, railheads, hutting, horse-standings, camps, salvage, casualty clearing stations, water-supply, drainage, agriculture ; there were actually employed weekly on defences from the week ending 12th January to the week ending 16th March, respectively, only the following totals of men : 4 ; 6 ; 518 ; 626 ; 680 ; 1,489 ; 1,938 ; 3,120 ; 7,670 ; 8,830.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile on the rest of the British front defence preparations were progressing steadily in accordance with the orders of the 14th December, which had been amplified from time to time by various supplementary instructions. The commanders of the Third, First, and Fourth Armies had not found it necessary to make special representations to G.H.Q. although all reported shortage of labour. Schemes for the destruction of bridges, important road centres and such like, in case of retirement, had been drawn up, and the preparations for carrying them out were in hand. The study of possible inundations in the various valleys and low-lying areas along the front was ordered. An investigation of inundations possible behind the front, along the various canal lines, had been begun by the Engineer-in-Chief in 1914, and the measures necessary to form them—the blocking of bridges, culverts, etc., and the making of cuts—had all been recorded and arranged.

<sup>1</sup> The classes of labour making up the 40,212 men actually at work in the week ending 16th March were British, 18,146 ; Indian, 3,251 ; Prisoners of War, 7,406 ; Italians, 7,382 ; Chinese, 4,027. On 2nd Feb. the total had been 9,078, 3,096, 7,681, 943 Chinese and no Italians. The men were organized in companies (see Note at end of Chapter).

In addition must be reckoned in the Fifth Army as available for work on defences, 14 entrenching battalions, varying in strength from 650 to over 1,000 ; and the greater proportion of the men of the divisional pioneer battalions and engineer units.

Steps had been taken, by sending special officers from G.H.Q., to ensure the co-ordination of the defence systems of the different Armies, to improve communications, to develop the Rear Zone defences as soon as labour could be spared from the defences nearer to the front, and to store water, rations and ammunition. Instructions were issued on the use of tanks and aircraft in defence, on the best methods of combating tanks, trench mortars and bombing attacks, and other details of defence.

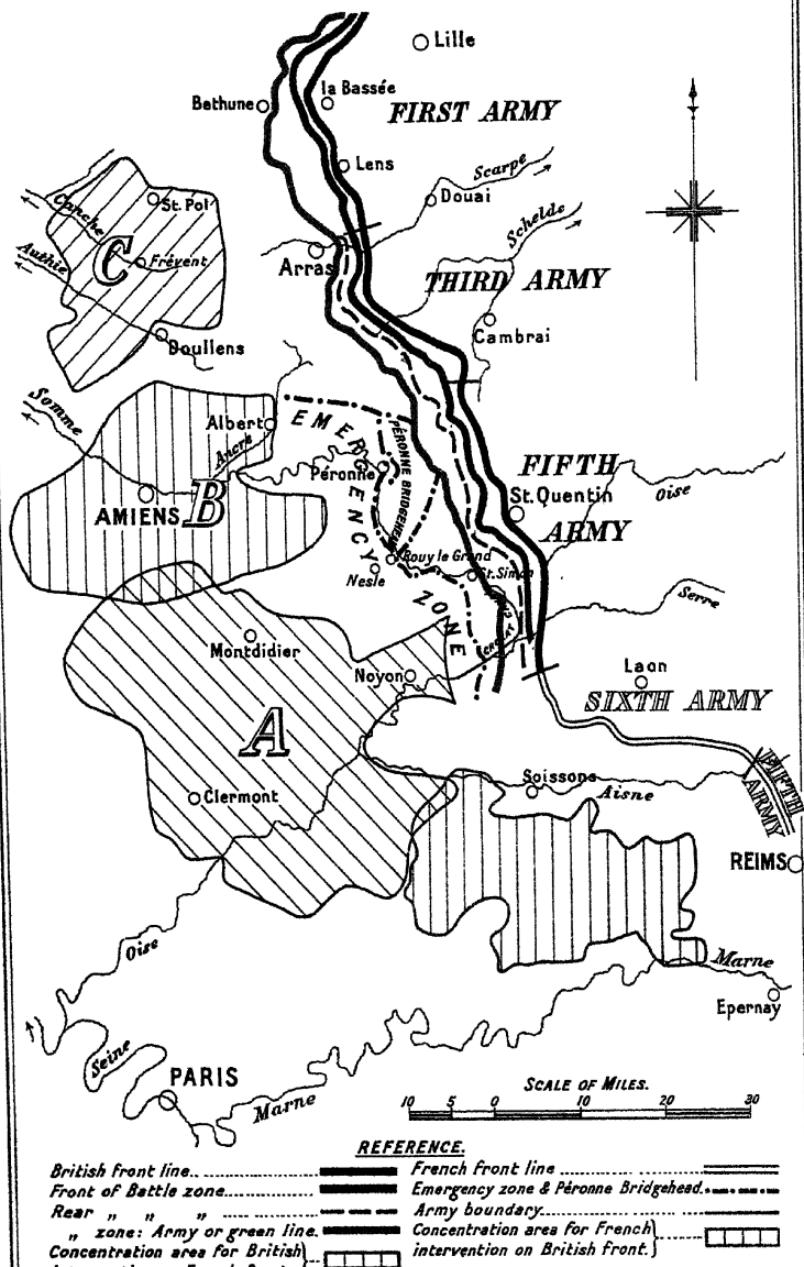
The plans of the Fourth Army for a voluntary retirement in the Ypres Salient, to economise troops, had been completed in accordance with the instructions issued on the 10th January.<sup>1</sup> In the event of such a withdrawal being ordered, the Army commander proposed to fall back to a line running from Polygon Wood northwards through St. Julien : for the garrison of his existing front he estimated that he required not less than ten divisions in line and five in reserve : he calculated that a retirement to the line proposed would enable him to release three or four of these, or, if there were no signs of attack threatening on his front, even five or six : the difficulty of even a voluntary withdrawal lay in moving back the heavy guns over the bad ground : even with the special arrangements made to accomplish the work quickly, this move might take as much as four days on some parts of his front.

As soon as it was established that preparations for attack were in progress behind the enemy's line, the R.F.C. was instructed to interfere with them. This was carried out not only by co-operation with the artillery, but by extensive bombing attacks designed to do damage, especially to aerodromes, large ammunition dumps, and concentrations of rolling stock (of which the Germans were short), leaving headquarters and railway traffic alone until the battle began. Endeavour was also made to inflict casualties on enemy troops and disturb their rest. Whilst massing for battle it was the enemy's deliberate policy to show himself not very active in the air ; thus although there was much desultory fighting, and occasionally a clash between large formations, the majority of the R.F.C. offensive patrols, sent out to cover the machines engaged on work of interference, or to obtain information, were carried out without particular incident. From the Fifth Army area No. 101 Squadron was engaged on night bombing ; the Third Army at this time had no night-bombing squadron.

<sup>1</sup> See page 44.



*Sketch 8.* Part of Allied Front showing  
CONCENTRATION AREAS FOR MUTUAL INTERVENTION.



*REFERENCE.*

British front line.....	French front line.....
Front of Battle zone.....	Emergency zone & Péronne Bridgehead.....
Rear " " " "	Army boundary.....
" zone: Army or green line.	Concentration area for French intervention on British front.
Concentration area for British intervention on French front. }	[A small diagram consisting of a horizontal line with vertical bars above it.]

Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch)

Ordnance Survey 1982.

There was a definite concentration of bombing against the enemy aerodrome at Etreux (22 miles south-east of Cambrai) and against Busigny railway junction (14 miles south-east of Cambrai); but apart from this the operations were distributed over a large number of widely separated objectives.

For the battle, when it should begin, the whole front was parcelled out so as to ensure the maximum effort from the limited force of aircraft available. The corps squadrons had general orders to concentrate on counter-battery work, artillery patrols, counter-attack patrols, counter-battery photographs, and the harassing of enemy troops and transport, whilst all surplus energy after the day's operations were over was to be devoted to night bombing. The duties of the Army squadrons, in order of importance, were defined as : preventing interference with corps machines ; attack of detraining points, " debussing " centres, active battery positions, and troops and transport on roads ; attack of enemy front-line troops by low-flying machines ; and patrolling at high levels in order to enable Army machines to carry out their other missions.

It was anticipated that the enemy infantry attacks would take place at, or just before, dawn, and at least one flight per Army squadron was to be ready to get off immediately there was sufficient light to operate offensively and then destroy enemy machines over the battle area.

Arrangements for co-operation between the French and Sketch 8. British Armies, as agreed on by the Commanders-in-Chief on the 17th December, had also by this time taken definite shape. General Humbert (headquarters at Clermont), who was to command the French Third Army, if formed, had, as we have seen, been charged with the elaboration of plans for the relief of the British Fifth Army, or, alternatively, for intervention by French troops on the British front. On the other side, Lieut.-General Sir A. Hamilton Gordon (headquarters at Noyon), with the staff of the IX. Corps, then without troops, had been detailed to study relief or intervention by British troops on the French front ; and this was done by direct intercourse between the two staffs.

So far as the Third and Fifth Armies were concerned, the plans finally approved on the 7th March by both Commanders-in-Chief may be summarized as follows. Relief of all or part was to be asked for only in the event of the British being engaged in a battle on another part of

their front ; intervention might be asked for in the case of a serious and sustained German offensive against any part of the British front making it difficult for the British to find sufficient reserves to maintain the fight. As a preparation for such an eventuality three areas were selected in which French troops could be concentrated before intervening, viz. Montdidier-Noyon, round Amiens, and round Frévent-St. Pol : provision was to be made for the rapid concentration of six French divisions in any one of these three areas, with extra artillery and Army troops, to be increased by the addition of other divisions as might be necessary :<sup>1</sup> any such French troops were to operate, as far as could be arranged, on the right of the British : they were to be employed as a whole and not to be thrown into the fight piecemeal ; they were to come under British command unless a definite zone was taken over by the French—in which case any British troops remaining in that zone were to pass under French command. It was considered that the operations to be undertaken might be counter-attack or the rapid occupation of defensive positions in rear of the battle front, or the relief of the British troops on a portion of the southern part of the front and the continuation of the battle on that ground.

It was agreed that from the Montdidier area the French troops would probably be used either to secure the bridge-heads across the Somme from St. Simon to Rouy le Grand (east of Nesle) and perhaps for counter-attack north-eastwards in co-operation with British troops from the Péronne bridgehead ; or to hold the Rear Zone from the existing point of junction of the French and British Armies, along the Crozat canal to the Somme, and thence the line of the Somme to Rouy le Grand.

The method of employment of the French troops if concentrated in the Amiens or St. Pol area was also discussed and agreed on, as well as the arrangements for relief or intervention on the French front by the British. For each eventuality all details connected with the movement, preliminary assembly and employment were worked out and recorded.<sup>2</sup>

The possibility that the Belgian Army might need help

<sup>1</sup> The note stated that the six divisions would not be concentrated in the Montdidier—Noyon or Amiens area until the evening of the fourth day, and later, of course, round St. Pol.

<sup>2</sup> A note, dated 17th March, went into all the details of transport, protection of moves, aviation, anti-aircraft services, communications, signals, maps, supply, ammunition, dumps, camouflage, interpreters, etc.

was also provided for, although, as far as could be seen, the Germans regarded the sector from Bécelaere (east of Ypres) to the sea as a defensive front ; by the 23rd February it could be said that this defensive attitude on the part of the enemy extended as far south as Lille. In the first fortnight of February, by agreement with the French, the Belgians had extended their left to the coast, relieving the two French divisions which had again taken over the front held by the British during the Flanders battle in 1917 ; but these two divisions remained in reserve behind the front they had occupied. General Pétain proposed to leave them there, and he requested Sir Douglas Haig to provide any further assistance which might be requested in the event of a serious attack on the Belgian front. To this proposal, both British and Belgian G.H.Q. agreed, and the necessary arrangements were in due course worked out between them.

Whilst preparations for co-operation were thus proceeding, the concentration of the enemy's forces on the Western Front continued to grow more and more formidable. By the middle of February it was estimated at G.H.Q. that the Germans had :

On the Western Front . . . .	177	divisions <sup>1</sup>
„ „ Eastern „ . . . .	58	„
„ „ Italian „ . . . .	3	„
„ „ Balkan „ . . . .	3	„
In Asia Minor and Syria the equivalent of	2	„

The strength of the 177 divisions was estimated at 1,621 battalions, with 8,892 field and 5,540 heavy guns and howitzers, as against 165 Allied divisions (excluding American) of 1,560 battalions, with 8,814 field and 6,368 heavy pieces.

Of the German total, 110 divisions were reported to be in the front line, 50 of these being opposite the short British front ; 67 divisions were in reserve, 31 being believed to be opposite the British, 11 in Alsace-Lorraine and 25 in a central position. In the G.H.Q. Intelligence Summary of the 10th-16th February, it was stated that between the Scarpe and the La Bassée canal (Arras to Béthune) there were no signs of any imminent offensive on a large scale ; Sketch B. in the St. Quentin—Cambrai sector, the enemy's activity

<sup>1</sup> Gehre gives 177, 56, 2, respectively, on the Western, Eastern and Italian fronts.

pointed equally to a defensive or offensive attitude.<sup>1</sup> The French considered that if the Germans attacked early, the main blow would fall on them, and, judging from the state of the enemy preparations in the middle of February, the most likely sector to be assailed was in Champagne between the Suippe and the Aisne (a front of 30 miles), with subsidiary attacks at Verdun (10 miles), or in Lorraine (15 miles), or Alsace (20 miles); the chief artillery registration, they said, had been in the Champagne and Verdun sectors, and practically every prisoner captured by them spoke of an offensive in Champagne. As regards dates, the balance of evidence pointed to March, captured documents seeming to indicate the 10th of that month.

At the Army Commanders' conference held at Doullens on the 16th February, Br.-General Cox, the head of the Intelligence Section of the General Staff, nevertheless emphasized the enemy's greatly increased strength, and, to use his own introductory words, said, "The enemy will attack; he 'will attack soon; he will attack on the Western Front'. He maintained that all signs pointed to a very severe attack against the British. From the German field artillery available, he had calculated that, with the usual density of guns, it might be on a front of thirty to thirty-two miles. Sir Douglas Haig, in summing up, opened his remarks, as recorded in the memorandum circulated after the conference, by saying :

"Although the enemy's resources may not allow him to 'attack on a greater front than thirty to forty miles, it 'must be remembered that this front need not be con-'tinuous. We must therefore be prepared to be attacked 'on a much wider front, possibly from Lens to the Oise'.<sup>2</sup> Given dry winds, he considered that the Flanders front, where the Béthune coal mines offered a tempting bait, might be liable to attack early in April, or even in March:<sup>3</sup> he felt sure that the enemy would attempt surprise in some

<sup>1</sup> The signs indicating an offensive were: increase in wireless and telephone stations; new batteries, aerodromes, ammunition dumps, hospitals, improvement of communications and additional lights at night, which could be seen from the air; whilst the close examination of aeroplane photographs showed such things as tracks of troops, trench-mortar emplacements, little piles of shell near the guns—sure signs of the mounting of an attack. The improvement of the front-line defences and preparations which subsequent diagnosis proved to be deceptive, indicated the defensive.

<sup>2</sup> The German front of attack on 21st March was from Croisilles (16 miles south of Lens) to the Oise.

<sup>3</sup> The offensive took place there on 9th April.

form, either by a greater development of gas, for instance, "long and continuous gas bombardment" of the Allied artillery (as actually happened), or by the use of tanks. He particularly insisted on the necessity of defence in depth, elasticity of artillery defence, co-operation on the flanks of formations with those next to them, and economy of reserves, as a prolonged struggle must be expected.

On the 26th February the Intelligence Section reported evident signs of preparation for attacks in the Havrincourt (south-west of Cambrai)—Croisilles (8 miles south-east of Arras) sector, but that elsewhere there were no definite signs of immediate attack. From the beginning of March onwards evidence rapidly accumulated pointing to an attack being imminent between the Oise and the Scarpe, with possibly a simultaneous offensive against the French in Champagne.

At the Army Commanders' conference on the 2nd March, the Intelligence statement as regards indications of the enemy's intentions which was read out was :—

Nothing but raids and possibly a small attack in the Menin Road Sector is to be expected in Flanders. The Germans are, however, preparing for offensive operations in Flanders, when the ground is suitable.

There are no further indications of any imminent offensive on a large scale between the Lys and the Scarpe.

There are strong indications that the enemy intends to attack on the Third and Fifth Army fronts, with the object of cutting off the Cambrai salient and drawing in our reserves.

By the same date the enemy divisions known to be on the Western Front had risen to 181, and it was considered possible that two or three more might have arrived from Italy or Russia. Information had been obtained which pointed to the relief by Austro-Hungarian troops of the three German divisions assumed to be still in Italy,<sup>1</sup> and to the withdrawal thence of all German aircraft except one squadron. Of the 181 divisions, 70 were now in reserve, five of these being between the Swiss frontier and Verdun (exclusive), 19 between Verdun and the Oise, 32 between the Oise and the sea, and 14 were still unlocated, but were probably in the narrow area Sedan—Charleroi—Courtrai.

By the 10th March the German forces on the Western Front were known to be not less than 185 divisions, of which 77 were believed to be in reserve, no fewer than 47

<sup>1</sup> This was correct.

of these being, it was thought, opposite the British front. Reports had been received that General von Hutier, commanding the sector opposite the Fifth Army from the Oise to St. Quentin, had moved his headquarters closer to the front, and that a new Army headquarters under General Otto von Below<sup>1</sup> had been interpolated between Cambrai and Lens, the Bapaume—Cambrai road being the southern boundary of the new Army.

Thus the front formerly held by the Second Army under General von der Marwitz had now three Armies in it, the new Armies being commanded by two generals who had recently won conspicuous successes on other fronts, while there was no such increase of Armies in any other sector. There were rumours of the advance of O.H.L. from Kreuznach to Spa,<sup>2</sup> and a movement of large quantities of artillery was reported to have been going on for some time—and to be still continuing—from Belgium towards Mons and Maubeuge.<sup>3</sup>

The Weekly Summary of Intelligence issued on the 10th March summed up as follows :—

There is no reason to believe that the enemy has at present any offensive intention in Flanders, but raiding activity will continue. A raid in the sector of the Ypres—Roulers railway is expected on the night of the 14th/15th March, and raids are also expected in the Messines area.

Between the Lys and the La Bassée Canal, the enemy is preparing an offensive, probably between Bois Grenier and Neuve Chapelle [about 7 miles N.N.E. of Béthune], with the object of retaining reserves in this sector and distracting attention from his main offensive further south.

During the last fortnight, the enemy by his aerial, wireless and artillery activity, has endeavoured to attract attention to

<sup>1</sup> General Otto v. Below at the beginning of the war had commanded the *I. Reserve Corps* in the Tannenberg campaign, and then the *Eighth Army* at the northern end of the Eastern Front until Oct. 1916, when he was sent to command in Macedonia. In April 1917 he had superseded General von Falkenhausen in command of the *Sixth Army* on the Western Front after the latter's defeat in the Battle of Arras. In September he was sent to Italy to command the German contingent in the Caporetto campaign. He returned to France in January.

<sup>2</sup> This took place.

<sup>3</sup> There were many rumours during the winter of attack being intended in other theatres and of a German advance through Switzerland being contemplated. As it was to be expected that the enemy would spread false information, and as the action suggested was inherently improbable, no serious importance, was attached at G.H.Q. to such reports. The rumours as regards an attack in Champagne were very persistent and, being supported by signs of preparations, were thoroughly believed at French G.Q.G., as was intended by the enemy.

this sector. The fact that several villages south-west of Lille have been evacuated [cleared of inhabitants] indicates that a number of divisions are being massed in close reserve to exploit any success.

The general impression gained of the artillery situation in this area is that, while there has undoubtedly been an increase in the number of guns, the enemy is anxious to impress us with his strength.

It is very probable that the attack in this sector will precede the main offensive farther south and may be expected daily.

The possibility of an attack in the Hill 70 sector, in conjunction with the attack in the Bois Grenier—Neuve Chapelle sector, must not be lost sight of.

The imminence of the offensive in the Arras—St. Quentin area has been confirmed both by deserters' statements and by the enemy's activity in the construction of large ammunition dumps, light railways and the improvement of his communications.

The large concentration of artillery flights in this area continues, and night reconnaissances have seen an abnormal number of lights in back areas.

Prisoners from a number of divisions on other parts of the front have stated that their divisions are being relieved, with a view to taking part in an offensive on the Arras front.

From the indications at present available, it is probable that the main offensive will be between the rivers Scarpe and Omignon, but it is improbable that the southern boundary will be south of Epéhy [11 miles N.N.E. of Péronne].

There are also vague prisoners' statements pointing to the possibility of a minor offensive in the sector south of St. Quentin, but no other indications support this theory.

As regards the French front, no further indications of the enemy's intentions have been reported.

In the last Summary of Intelligence issued before the battle, dated the 17th March, the appreciation of the situation was :—

In Flanders, the enemy's increased raiding activity indicates anxiety to obtain identifications and to discover any redistribution or reduction in our forces in that area. There are still no signs of any offensive on a large scale, but a local attack may be intended in the Gapaard—Warneton sector [south-east of Ypres].

As regards the rest of the British front, there is no reason to alter the view already expressed that an offensive is intended in the Arras—St. Quentin sector, combined with a subsidiary attack in the Bois Grenier—Neuve Chapelle sector.

Nor is there any reason to alter the opinion that the main

attack on the French front will be delivered in the Aisne—Suisse sector.

There are not sufficient indications at present to forecast the date of the enemy's attack, and any attempt to do so on the information now available is unsound.

It is possible that, as a result of recent raids on both the British and French fronts, the enemy feels that he has not yet sufficient preponderance, either in infantry or artillery, to justify an immediate offensive. There are also indications that public opinion in Germany has still to be convinced of the necessity for an offensive in the West, and of the likelihood of its success.

The continued reinforcement, however, of the enemy's troops in the Western Theatre by infantry divisions and artillery from the East, and the constant increase of ammunition dumps and aeroplane accommodation on the Arras—St. Quentin front, combined with repeated changes in the enemy's wireless call signs and codes, are definite indications that the Germans are completing their preparations for attack.

The final warning will almost certainly be a short one. Up to the present it has not been given, and, although we must be prepared for an attack at short notice, there is no reason to expect an offensive from day to day.

By the 17th, it was known that the German forces on the Western Front had increased to at least 187 divisions, of which 80 were believed to be in reserve, but up to the 19th no reliefs or reinforcements on any considerable scale had as yet taken place on the enemy's front. It was anticipated that the final reinforcement would not be made until the last moment, and that the troops detailed for it would not be moved up until just before the battle, and then by night with the greatest possible secrecy.

In arriving at these conclusions, the Intelligence Branch had been much assisted by the reports obtained from the R.F.C. The weather throughout the month of January had been bad, and had hindered air observation and photography; but, nevertheless, an important clue to the German intentions had been obtained by the discovery on the fronts of the Fifth and Third Armies of abnormal railway traffic and of many new aerodromes, dumps, railway sidings and hospital camps. For example, by the end of January, fourteen new aerodromes had been found opposite the right of the Fifth Army.

On the 2nd February, Major-General J. M. Salmond, now in command of the R.F.C., gave orders for more frequent reconnaissance on the front of the Fifth Army,

strengthening that front by eight aeroplanes for the purpose, and sending the G.H.Q. reconnaissance squadron for work beyond the area of the Army squadron. As a result almost daily reports were brought in of increasing train movements opposite the fronts of the Fifth and Third Armies. On the 24th February Major-General Salmond assembled the brigade commanders and gave them instructions as to the importance of obtaining evidence—such as the release of aircraft hitherto held back—which would aid the determination of the date of the impending attack.

Towards the end of the month the air reports and photographs revealed a marked increase in German road and rail movements in the suspected area and further signs of the mounting of the offensive, including a daily extension of the network of light railways.

Although the early days of the month of March were fine and cold, with only occasional sleet and snow, as it advanced clouds thickened and rain set in. For four days, from the 17th to the 20th inclusive, that is to say to the very eve of the battle, early morning reconnaissance was impossible, there was little doing in the air and the enemy was distinctly inactive. On the morning of the 18th, although there had been much noise of traffic at night, ground observers reported no abnormal road movements in the forward areas. On that day, however, a German pilot was brought down, who revealed that the attack would be made on the 20th or 21st March.

Very early on the 19th March the last pieces of evidence regarding the approaching storm were gathered on the Fifth Army front. A captured German artillery N.C.O., a group of infantry prisoners, and Alsatian deserters from a trench-mortar battery, all told the same story, each in his own way and in some cases unwillingly, and what they said was confirmed by a prisoner taken, and a Polish deserter who came in, on the Third Army front. They had been warned that an offensive was imminent: there was a state of nervous tension: the men were being worked very hard and urged to greater exertions in carrying up ammunition: the back areas were full of troops: there were no tanks about, but a new pattern gas mask had been issued: and operations were expected to begin on the 20th or 21st. As a result of the sum of all this intelligence, Br.-General Cox, and Lieut.-Colonels F. S. G. Piggott, R.E., and A. R. C. Sanders, R.E., the G.S.O.'s 1 (Intelligence) of the Fifth and Third Armies, were able to agree that the attack would

come against the Fifth and Third Armies, that for the present nothing more than minor operations was likely further north, and that the final details as regards the date and hour of the enemy's attack, the nature of the preliminary gas bombardment, the German reserves available—the total which had been expected had arrived—were now in our possession. On this day the Fifth Army Intelligence Summary concluded with the words : “ Indications of a “ more than usually definite nature point to the fact that “ the enemy's preparations are practically complete ” and General Gough wrote home :—

I expect a bombardment will begin to-morrow night, last six or eight hours, and then will come the German infantry on Thursday 21st.<sup>1</sup>

The enemy was ostentatiously showing great activity by raids and local attacks north of the Scarpe, no doubt in order to gain information of any change in the British dispositions. South of the Scarpe there was a marked lack of enterprise at this time ; his patrols avoided contact whenever possible and the garrison of his forward trenches generally fell back without fighting, although any attempt at penetration was fiercely opposed. German aircraft usually restricted their operations to patrolling their own lines. Heavy artillery fire almost ceased on the Fifth Army front, although against the Third Army there were occasional bursts of heavy shelling, and on three successive nights some 120,000 gas shells were fired into the Flesquieres Salient, occasioning about 3,000 casualties in the 2nd Division alone.<sup>2</sup>

The only questions still in doubt on the eve of the offensive were whether the first attack would be the main effort or merely a preparatory one, and whether or not the French would be attacked simultaneously.

On the French front also hostile preparations were well advanced, and here, in contrast to their apparent inertness on the Fifth Army front the Germans were displaying great activity. At G.Q.G. it was accepted that the information available pointed to an early and heavy attack in Champagne.<sup>3</sup>

On the 20th March a heavy bombardment was opened by the enemy against the French in Champagne and at other

<sup>1</sup> Gough, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup> See also page 181, f.n. 2.

<sup>3</sup> For the measures taken by the enemy to deceive the French, see pages 153-5.

points, and strong local attacks were made against Verdun and Reims : these might be or might not be feints, but their value as evidence of an imminent assault on the French seemed, at G.H.Q., to be discounted by the discovery before midnight that large reinforcements were being moved up into position on the front of the British Fifth and Third Armies.

For some days the British artillery had been very active, assisting raids, testing barrages, and shelling trenches, hostile gun positions and special points and routes behind the German lines. On the nights of the 19th/20th and 20th/21st, parts of the enemy's front line were heavily gassed and bursts of artillery fire were directed against his probable assembly trenches,<sup>1</sup> and all necessary steps were taken in preparation to meet attacks. Much depended on the weather. The meteorological reports as regards visibility for the 13th to the 20th March had been :—

13th : Morning . . . slight fog ; . . . very foggy late at night in the north ; fog spreading gradually south. . . . Indifferent visibility.<sup>2</sup>

14th : Foggy in the early morning, with rain Béthune to Ypres. . . . Indifferent visibility.

15th : Fair visibility.

16th : Local fog at first. . . . Fair visibility.

17th : Visibility poor at first.

18th : Misty at first. . . . Visibility poor early.

19th : Rain before dawn, continuing wet all day. . . . Poor visibility.

20th : Fine at night, with local fog developing. . . . Poor or indifferent visibility.

The forecasts issued by the Meteorological Office at G.H.Q., under Major E. Gold, R.E., on the 20th March contained the following :—

11 A.M. Fair becoming bright and sunny for a time. . . . Good visibility.

<sup>1</sup> The Third Army had the good fortune to discover on a photograph a number of small white objects in pits east of Bullecourt, and a 9·2-inch howitzer was at once ranged on them. An explosion resulting, it was decided that the objects must be piles of ammunition boxes, and a general bombardment was ordered, which resulted in over a hundred explosions, large and small, being counted. Similar objects were noticed, always in hollows and valleys, on the Fifth Army front, and were thought to be tanks covered by tarpaulins, until some of them were hit and exploded.

<sup>2</sup> The varying degrees of visibility were graded as :—

Indifferent,	objects cannot be seen beyond a distance of	. 5,000 metres
Poor	—do.—	. 3,500 "
Very Poor	—do.—	. 1,000 "
Bad	—do.—	. 500 "
Very Bad	—do.—	. 120 "

5 P.M. Ground mist gradually developing.

9 P.M. Ground fog developing.

In the defence schemes no provision had been made for weather conditions, and when, on the evening of the 20th March, the mist and the fog began to form, no special instructions were issued as to the attitude to be adopted. The matter was not overlooked : special precautions were not considered necessary in the circumstances. The troops were extremely thin on the ground, how thin no one but an eye-witness can believe, and the commanders considered, therefore, that they would have been ill-advised to move their troops from their very carefully selected positions. To prevent the enemy getting through anywhere, and to deal with him promptly if parties were to get through, would have required every yard of wire to be manned, and counter-attacking troops to be posted close at hand. Had there been more troops available, certain special extra measures might have been taken without interference with the normal plan of defence. The fog was the German luck and, whatever dispositions had been made, the British would have had to give ground in face of an attack delivered in such heavy numbers under such conditions.

#### NOTE

##### ARMY TROOPS, FIFTH ARMY

(except artillery, for which see page 126, f.n. 1.)

##### *Engineers :*

Special (Projector) Companies (Gas) . . . . .	3
(Mortar)     "     "     "     " . . . . .	1
Advanced Parks . . . . .	2
Army Troops Companies . . . . .	16
Siege Companies . . . . .	2
Tunnelling Companies . . . . .	8
Electrical and Mechanical Company . . . . .	1
Boring Section . . . . .	1
Army Workshop . . . . .	1
Sound Ranging Sections . . . . .	7
Observation Groups . . . . .	7
Anti-Aircraft Searchlight Sections . . . . .	6
Foreway Company (in charge of tramways, etc., in the defended zones) . . . . .	1

##### *Signal Service :*

Air-line Sections . . . . .	3
Cable Sections . . . . .	2
Light Railway Signal Section . . . . .	1
Signal Construction Section . . . . .	1

*Pigeon Service :*

Motor Mobile Lofts . . . . .	4
Horse-drawn Mobile Lofts . . . . .	12
Fixed Loft . . . . .	1

*Infantry : Garrison Guard Company*

. . . . .	1
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*Military Police Traffic Control* . . . . . squadron, 1, company, 1*Army Service Corps :*

Pontoon Parks, M.T. Companies . . . . .	2
Army Troops, M.T. Companies . . . . .	3
Mobile Repair Unit . . . . .	1

*Medical :*

Motor Ambulance Convoys . . . . .	5
Casualty Clearing Stations . . . . .	10
Advanced Depots Medical Stores . . . . .	2
Mobile Laboratories . . . . .	5
Mobile Dental Unit . . . . .	1
Stationary Hospital . . . . .	1
Sanitary Sections . . . . .	15

*Ordnance :*

Heavy Mobile Workshop . . . . .	1
Light Mobile Workshops . . . . .	2
Ordnance Gun Park . . . . .	1
Officers' Clothing Depot . . . . .	1

*Forestry : Companies* . . . . . 3*Labour :*

Labour Companies (British) . . . . .	60
Area Employment Companies . . . . .	8
Area Employment (Garrison Guard) Companies . . . . .	5
Italian Labour Companies . . . . .	34
Prisoner of War Companies . . . . .	25
Indian Labour Companies . . . . .	11
Chinese Labour Companies . . . . .	10

*Army Printing and Stationery Services :*

Section . . . . .	1
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## CHAPTER VI

### FINAL DISPOSITIONS AND PREPARATIONS

The Fronts of the Four Armies—G.H.Q. Reserve—General Description of the Country over which the Fighting took place—Nature and State of the Defences of the Fifth and Third Armies. The Forward Zone, Battle Zone and Green Line; Artillery; Distribution of the Fifth Army; Distribution of the Third Army.

(Maps 1, 2, 3 ; Sketches A, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, B)

On the eve of the German offensive the Fifth Army, forming Map 1. the right of the British line, held a front of 42 miles, from Sketch A. just south of Barisis to a little north of Gouzeaucourt (10 miles S.S.W. of Cambrai). For the defence of this long line General Gough had at his disposal 12 divisions and 3 cavalry divisions,<sup>1</sup> with 1,566 (515 heavy<sup>2</sup>) guns and howitzers.<sup>3</sup> Nearly 10 of these 42 miles, however, were, as already mentioned, covered by the Oise, a river running in several streams through a wide open valley, which was marshy in many places, and lay within view and effective fire from the British Forward Zone. Of the four miles of front south of the Oise, part lay in low ground of similar character, though that lying furthest south was in the broken and wooded country of St. Gobain, to which it was doubtful whether the offensive would extend.<sup>4</sup>

The Third Army held a front of 28 miles, from the left of the Fifth Army to near Gavrelle (6 miles north-east of

<sup>1</sup> The 4th (Indian) Cavalry Division had been disbanded in France on 6th March and its units had proceeded to Egypt. The 5th (Indian) Cavalry Division went there, also, as an organized formation. The two divisions left behind them four British cavalry regiments and two brigades R.H.A. These regiments went to other cavalry divisions in exchange for the 1st and 2nd Life Guards, Royal Horse Guards and the Yeomanry regiments (except the 1/1st Oxfordshire Hussars), which, with the R.H.A., were then allotted as Army Troops to the Fifth Army.

<sup>2</sup> Technically, medium, heavy and super-heavy.

<sup>3</sup> For details, see p. 126, f.n. 1.

<sup>4</sup> No infantry attack took place south of the Oise on 21st March.

Arras). For the defence of this sector General Byng had 14 divisions, with 1,120 (461 heavy) guns and howitzers.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Third Army, with a shorter front, was stronger in divisions than the Fifth, and although its total number of guns was less, it could dispose of 40 guns to the mile, as compared with 37; but the artillery of both Armies was much inferior to the located guns of the enemy, which had been calculated to amount to 80 to the mile. Moreover, included in the Third Army front was the Flesquières (or Cambrai) Salient, measuring 10 miles round the front line, but only 7 across the base. In accordance with instructions issued by Sir Douglas Haig after an inspection in December and repeated on the 10th March, the salient was only to be held as a false front, in sufficient strength to check raids: the troops occupying it, if seriously attacked, were to fall back on the Battle Zone, the front of which was sited approximately along the base.<sup>2</sup>

For the defence of the next 33 miles, extending from Gavrelle to Armentières, both inclusive, the First Army had 14 (including two Portuguese) divisions, with 1,450 guns and howitzers. Behind this long front lay the dominating tactical feature of Vimy Ridge, with its north-westward continuation, Lorette Ridge, and the important Béthune coalfields.

The Second Army<sup>3</sup> had 12 divisions for the occupation of a front of 23 miles, extending from the left of the First Army to the Coverbeek stream, where it joined the Belgian line. This front could, as arranged,<sup>4</sup> be reduced to 20 miles, thus saving two or three divisions, by abandoning the forward part of the Ypres Salient, and falling back to the Polygon Wood—St. Julien line.

When this minimum of troops had thus been allotted to Armies by Sir Douglas Haig, there remained only eight divisions for the G.H.Q. reserve, including the 41st Division, which had just returned from Italy and was held at the disposal of the Executive War Board. These eight divisions were parcelled out behind the 126-mile long British front, two behind each Army—a truly alarming situation as it seemed when the distribution was viewed on the General Staff map. They were kept ready to move at a

<sup>1</sup> For details, see page 180, f.n. 1.    <sup>2</sup> See note at end of Appendix 6.

<sup>3</sup> The name had been changed back, from Fourth Army, when General Plumer took over the Flanders front again on his return from Italy on 17th March, and General Rawlinson went to Versailles.

<sup>4</sup> See page 100. General Rawlinson had considered that he could hold the front with 11 or 12 divisions.

few hours' notice, special arrangements being made for their rapid transportation when required by rail and bus.

The smallness of the general reserve was indeed very disquieting, for only by throwing in fresh divisions can a commander influence a battle. It will be seen in the course of the narrative how the arrival on the field of even the infantry of one fresh division—the artillery and other divisional troops following hours, even days after—stemmed, at any rate for a time, the German onrush.

Besides the G.H.Q. reserve, certain divisions drawn from those allotted to the Armies were held in reserve by the Armies and corps :—

	Army Reserve.	Corps Reserve.
Fifth Army . . .	2 (1 Cavalry)	2 (both Cavalry) <sup>1</sup>
Third , , . . .	1	3
First , , . . .	1	1
Second , , . . .	2	1

Including the G.H.Q. reserve, the total number of divisions in reserve worked out to one to 18,000 yards on the Fifth Army front, one to 8,100 yards on the Third Army front, one to 14,500 yards on the First Army front, and one to 8,200 on the Second Army front. This was a sound distribution based on consideration of the strategic importance of the sectors, but it hardly took into account the relative strength of their defences.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The cavalry fought dismounted in the battle, unless otherwise stated. The rifle-strength of a cavalry division was approximately equivalent to that of an infantry brigade.

<sup>2</sup> In tabular form the distribution of the major formations and units between the Armies was :—

	Second Army	First Army	Third Army	Fifth Army
Corps headquarters . . . . .	4	6*	4	4
Divisions . . . . .	14**	16**	16**	14**
Cavalry Divisions . . . . .	..	..	..	3
R.H.A. Army Brigade . . . . .	..	..	..	1
R.F.A. Army Brigades . . . . .	10	11	3	23
R.G.A. . . . .	24	18	23	22
R.G.A. Siege Batteries, not brigaded. . . . .	25	15	20	15
Anti-Aircraft batteries . . . . .	5	5	5	4
R.E. Companies and units . . . . .	68	56	54	56
R.F.C. Brigades . . . . .	1	1	1	1
Miles of Front . . . . .	23	33	28	42

It will be observed, on comparing the table with that on page 48 (f.n. 2), that the Fifth Army had been strengthened at the expense of the Second (late Fourth).

\* Including the Portuguese Corps of 2 divisions.

\*\* The two divisions in G.H.Q. reserve behind each Army are here included.

Out of a total of 99 divisions, exclusive of cavalry and American troops, the French had 60 in the line and 39 in reserve. Thus their proportion of divisions in reserve, in spite of having a much longer front, was roughly 40 per cent., whilst the British was 30 per cent. This is partly explained by the fact that our Allies, relying on their more numerous artillery, and having plenty of space behind them so that they could without danger give ground, held their line more lightly with infantry than the British could. Of the 39 French divisions in reserve, no less than 15 were on the right wing south of the Meuse, as a precaution against a possible German advance through Switzerland, and there were (excluding two on the coast) only four west of Soissons, within easy reach of the British left; the majority were behind the French centre in the Champagne area.<sup>1</sup>

Both G.H.Q. and G.Q.G., judging from previous experience, anticipated that a German offensive, even if successful on a large scale, would do no more than occasion a more or less gradual withdrawal of the troops on the front attacked, which would allow time for the Allied reserves to be brought up and assembled at a safe distance behind that front, and sent into action deliberately in accordance with the pre-arranged plan. This anticipation was to be falsified on the Fifth Army front.

A special G.H.Q. reserve of artillery was provided by earmarking a few batteries for the purpose from those allotted to Armies. Altogether twelve brigades R.G.A. and six brigades R.F.A. were thus detailed. A spare corps headquarters (X. Corps, Lieut.-General Sir T. L. N. Mordan) was charged by the Commander-in-Chief with preparing plans for the concentration, east and south-east of St. Pol, of a reserve corps, to be composed of four divisions,

<sup>1</sup> F.O.A. vi. (i.), p. 228, speaks of the French reserves being in "two great groups", one, 19 divisions strong, between the Oise and the Argonne, the other, 18 divisions strong, from the Argonne to the southern extremity of the Vosges. The remaining 2 divisions were south-east of Dunkirk, behind the Belgian front.

According to Map 16 with the above volume, one division (125th) was behind the left of the French Sixth Army, on the British right, and immediately available. One (9th), west of Compiègne, 30 miles south-west of Chauny (behind the British right); two (10th and 22nd) between Coulommiers and Paris, between 50 and 60 miles south of Chauny. In addition, the 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division was near Senlis, about 35 miles south of Chauny, and the 1st Cavalry Division behind the right of the Sixth Army.

The above-named divisions and the 62nd Division, which was 12 miles east of Soissons, were the first sent to the assistance of the British.

four Army brigades R.F.A., two brigades of heavy artillery (mobile) and a brigade of tanks.<sup>1</sup>

The number of aeroplanes fit for service varied from day to day owing to casualties. According to the last return available before the offensive began, the total was 1,144, exclusive of 111 machines of the Royal Naval Air Service detailed for employment on the coast. There were, including G.H.Q. units, 31 squadrons in the areas of the Third and Fifth Armies, a total of 579 serviceable aeroplanes, of which 261 were single-seater fighters. Opposed to them, there were with the German *Eighteenth, Second and Seventeenth Armies*, 730 aeroplanes, of which 326 were single-seater fighters. For the first time, the German air concentration for battle on the Western Front was greater than that of the Royal Flying Corps. With the First and Second Armies there were about four hundred machines, almost evenly divided between them.

Of tanks there were twelve battalions. The normal establishment of a battalion was 36 tanks; but some had less than this number. To the Fifth Army, three battalions were allotted; to the Third, four; and to the First, three. The remainder were in G.H.Q. reserve, none being sent to the Second Army owing to the ground in its sector having proved unsuitable for their use.<sup>2</sup>

Trench mortars and machine guns were distributed in due proportion along the front. There were about 3,000 of the former and 4,000 of the latter, besides some 17,000 Lewis guns. More than half the trench mortars were of the Stokes pattern.

<sup>1</sup> The schemes for employment were to comprise the occupation of a position on the high ground some ten miles behind a line between Bapaume and Arras, and a counter-attack thence in an easterly direction; alternatively, the occupation of the line of the Arras—Doullens road, and a counter-attack thence in a south-easterly direction. General Morland was also directed to consult with General Humbert of the French Third Army, and arrange for co-operation with any French forces which might simultaneously be concentrated about Amiens (see page 102).

<sup>2</sup> In the instruction issued from G.H.Q., on 13th Feb. 1918, on the use of tanks in defence, it was laid down that their rôle should be to assist in re-establishing the battle by counter-attacks, on suitable ground, either in deliberate co-operation with other arms, or, in emergency, without infantry support. The tactical directions for their handling in the former case, as laid down by Br-General H. J. Elles commanding the Tank Corps, were on the lines which had proved successful at Cambrai: tank units should be kept concentrated as far as possible whilst awaiting opportunities: dispersion forward would be likely to cause great damage to signal communications and light railways. The Army commanders, however, preferred in the March fighting to dispose and use them in small packets, as this method offered greater opportunities for surprise. The defensive measures against tanks included contact mines, guns specially detailed to deal with them, and special rifle grenades.

The ground over which the line of the Fifth and Third Armies ran was the watershed between the basins of the Somme and the Oise, and that of the Schelde. Northwards, this higher ground is continued to the Artois plateau, and eastwards it stretches across France to connect with the Ardennes. It may be described as a broad flat-topped ridge of chalk formation, averaging 500 feet above sea level and 300 feet above the adjacent rivers, with long spurs radiating from it in various directions. These spurs are separated sometimes by broad and open valleys, sometimes by narrow and steep-sided troughs. The main ridge is traversed by two canals: the eastern, the Crozat—St. Quentin canal,<sup>1</sup> passes underground in a tunnel at two places, whilst the western one, the Canal du Nord, then unfinished and filled with water only in places, is carried through the high ground partly in a very deep cutting and partly in a tunnel 4,000 yards long near Ytres. The Somme is canalized, and the old branches of the river, with the marshes surrounding them, are passable only on causeways; in conjunction with the canal, which—like the Crozat—St. Quentin canal—is 50 feet broad and 6 feet deep, these marshes constituted a formidable military obstacle. The upper course of the canalized Oise also, as already mentioned, is bordered by marshes.

Map 1.  
Sketch  
A.

The left of the Fifth Army lay on the highest part of the watershed. Thence southwards the defences were sited on the complicated alternation of spurs and valleys, gradually falling to the level of the Somme and the Oise. The Third Army defences were on the north-eastern slope of the watershed, overlooking the ground falling towards the valley of the Scarpe, a tributary of the Schelde.

The area, except for the devastated portion,<sup>2</sup> was very open, and unfenced; it had been under cultivation. The only apparent obstructions to ground observation were the

<sup>1</sup> The portion of this canal between the Oise and the Somme is generally known as the Crozat canal.

<sup>2</sup> The area devastated by the Germans in 1917 (see Sketch 7), extending for many miles behind the front of the Fifth and Third Armies, still presented a scene of utter desolation. Towns like Péronne and Bapaume had been gutted; the villages were in ruins, some of them in fact only marked by foundations of walls and débris; trees and orchards had been cut down and only three or four feet of their trunks stood, dead and bare. The ground was intersected by old trenches, pitted with shell craters, and obstructed by wire to a degree which made movement across country, even on foot, difficult and exhausting. Only the principal roads had been remade, and the state of the country, although unsuited for the defensive, seemed to justify the doubt whether the enemy would consider the area fit for an offensive to be pushed home on a grand scale.

undamaged villages and occasional woods of no great size ; but the general evenness of the ground and the long gentle slopes did not permit of extensive view from trench level—the St. Quentin canal, for instance, was not visible from the British front, although only about two miles distant from it—while, owing to valleys and minor undulations, there was more ground hidden from observation, except by aircraft, than would be realized by looking at a map. The area was, in fact, singularly well suited, under favourable conditions of weather, to delaying and rear-guard actions.

On the basis of the G.H.Q. Instructions of the 14th December 1917, the Armies had framed defence schemes, which are, for all practical purposes, the normal first operation orders in a defensive battle. In obedience to these the corps and divisional defence schemes were drawn up, and were emended and amplified from time to time as found to be necessary.

Thus the Third Army Defence Scheme,<sup>1</sup> was made up of seven parts : I. Defences (comprising the G.H.Q. Instructions, special instructions as to the Flesquières Salient, additional instructions and a map) ; II. Artillery Instructions ; III. Reserves (their distribution and probable movement under various eventualities : attacks on the right, left, centre and on the whole front) ; IV. Action of working, labour and other parties ; V. Anti-aircraft defences ; VI. Action in back areas in case of an enemy cloud gas attack ; and VII. Action at Army headquarters in case of an air attack.

The administrative arrangements were also drawn up and circulated to senior staff and departmental officers and corps.

In the Fifth Army Defence Scheme the headings were : Accommodation ; Battle Zone Railheads ; Distribution of Supplies, Ammunition, R.E. Stores and Road metal ; Strategic Railheads (for G.H.Q. reserves), with "embussing" and "debussing" centres ; Transportation ; Ammunition ; Ordnance (parks, workshops and trench stores, etc.) ; Reserve of Supplies ; Medical Arrangements ; Remounts ; Veterinary ; Collection and Custody of Stores ; Withdrawal of Labour Units ; Traffic Control ; Examination, Evacuation and Feeding of Civilians ; Circulation of Civilians during an Advance ; Prisoners of War ; Corps Reinforcement Camps ; Laundry and System of Provision of Clean Clothes ; and Burials.

The corps defence schemes went into more detail than

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 14.

those of the Armies. That of the VI. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir A. Haldane), which ran to 19 typed pages and appendices, was divided into six parts, including administrative arrangements :<sup>1</sup> Part I., General description of the corps front (including its tactical features) ; Part II. Policy to be followed on the corps front (embodying the principles of the G.H.Q. Instructions, and insisting on organization in depth, construction of deep dug-outs for the garrison, and the greatest possible amount of wire) ; Part III. Defensive organization (going into details of garrisons, use of machine guns, artillery, etc.) ; Part IV. Action in case of attack (of the divisions in the line and reserve in various contingencies, of the R.F.C., and of working parties, and arrangements for reinforcements) ; Part V. Precautionary measures (against gas, aeroplanes and tanks) ; and, Part VI. General (including signal, medical and police arrangements).

Attached to the scheme were maps showing the general organization of the defence ; general distribution of the garrison of the defences by battalions, with headquarters of formations and units, artillery positions, heavy and field artillery, S.O.S. lines and O.P.'s ; light railways ; dumps, dressing stations and tracks ; and road traffic routes. Besides this, there were large scale plans of the defences of the more important localities.

The headings of a divisional defence scheme<sup>2</sup> usually included : I. A general tactical description of the front and area, with its boundaries, sectors and the defensive arrangements of the neighbouring divisions, with a map ; the probable forms of enemy attack, and the zones of defence. II. The principles of defence, giving the troops available and their distribution ; tactical instructions for infantry, machine guns, artillery, anti-aircraft defence, engineers and pioneers ; and instructions as regards liaison, signal communications, routes and tracks. III. Action in the event of attack, including patrolling, manning of the defences, movements of reserves and working parties, and action of the reserves, with directions for the practice of assembly and forming up ; and the S.O.S. and "All Well" signals.

The administrative arrangements dealt with light railways, routes for transport, ammunition, dumps, location of strongpoints, R.E. dumps, camouflage officers, fuel dumps, salvage, supply refilling points, attached units,

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 15.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 16.

railways, Inspector of Ordnance Machinery Workshop, and medical arrangements.

In case of relief, these schemes were handed over from one division to another.

Work on the defences was continued until the last moment, and considerable progress had been made since the G.H.Q. report had been rendered on the 3rd January.<sup>1</sup> Weather conditions in the first three weeks of that month had greatly delayed work, and entailed the diversion of a large proportion of the available labour, especially in the Forward Zone, from new construction to maintenance. It may, however, be said that both in the Fifth and in the Third Army areas the state of the Forward Zone, which had been improved and maintained by the actual troops in the line, was good ; that of the Battle Zone was fair, though still incomplete, in particular lacking all varieties of dug-out accommodation in the Fifth Army area, and dug-outs for machine-gun posts in that of the Third Army. This latter Army, having been nearly twelve months in occupation of its ground, except for that portion affected by the Battle of Cambrai, and having much less new work to do in connection with hutting, water-supply, railheads and dumps had naturally developed its defences more thoroughly than the Fifth Army, part of whose line had been taken over from the French in January.<sup>2</sup> In addition to other obstacles, both Armies had laid a number of land mines against tanks. The difference between the two Armies was most marked as regards the Rear Zone (Green Line). In the Third Army this was wired throughout with two belts in front of the first line of trenches, and one belt in front of the second, the trenches being marked by shallow digging ; machine-gun nests had been made, the dug-outs for their crews were in hand, and some localities had been partly prepared. In the Fifth Army area, the French had not even indicated a Rear Zone on their maps as a "projet", and there had been neither time nor labour to do very much except to mark out the front line, erect a little wire at tactical points, and to show the best position for machine guns by notice boards ;<sup>3</sup> the bulk of the

<sup>1</sup> See page 45.

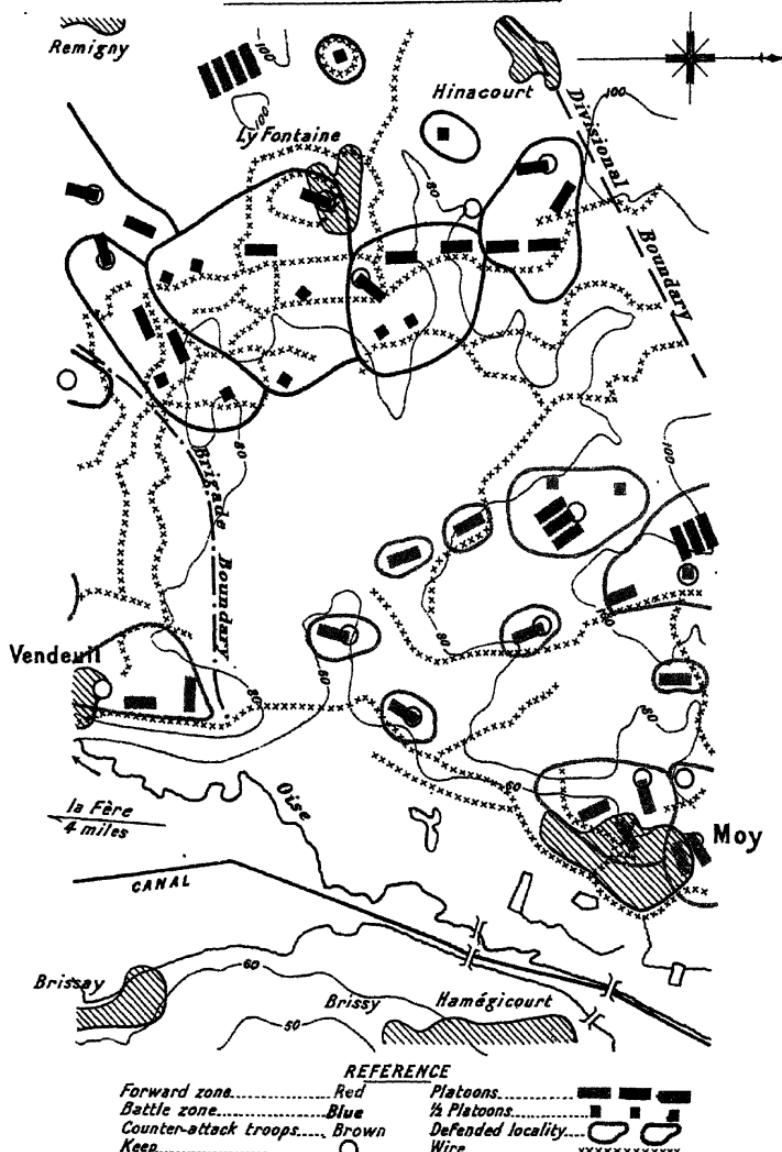
<sup>2</sup> See Sketches 2 and 3.

<sup>3</sup> It might be argued that if the back lines were marked out and wired, it was sufficient, but in such a case they must be manned. Retiring troops will seldom halt on a line that is little more than indicated, and will not always stop at a good trench unless there are troops already in position in it. There were not enough troops to provide for this.



Sketch 9.

SPECIMEN OF  
DEFENSIVE ORGANIZATION  
March 1918.



REFERENCE	
Forward zone.....	Red Platoons.....
Battle zone.....	Blue Platoons.....
Counter-attack troops.....	Brown Platoons.....
Keep.....	Defended locality.....
	Wire.....

SCALE OF YARDS.  
1000      500      0      1000      2000

Heights in metres.

Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch).

available labour had been concentrated on the Péronne bridgehead.<sup>1</sup>

As a whole, so little had been done to prepare a Rear Zone in the Fifth and Third Army areas that in this narrative of the March fighting the term will not further be employed, and the zone will be referred to as the Green Line, as was done in the contemporary reports.

The defences of the Forward Zone,<sup>2</sup> the depth of which varied considerably according to the tactical features of the ground, were generally organized in three lines, the third in some cases consisting of a series of small redoubts, designed for a company or half-company. Even the first two lines were not as a rule held continuously, the troops in the front line, particularly in the Fifth Army area, being disposed in isolated outpost groups, and in the second, in a chain of supporting posts. The location of these groups and posts was chosen so that the ground in front and between could be swept by rifle and machine-gun fire from them or by machine guns specially sited outside

<sup>1</sup> The numbers employed on this bridgehead on 10th March were given as :—

Tunnellers . . . . .	1,200
Fighting Troops . . . . .	2,600
Labour Units . . . . .	500
Italian Labour . . . . .	5,400

With reference to the Fifth Army defences as a whole, the G.H.Q. report sent to the War Office on 12th March 1918 stated :—

" As regards the Rear Zone and Péronne bridgehead, wire entanglements have been erected along portions of these defences ; trenches have been spit-locked, and the more important localities are being prepared "for defence." The report of Major-General P. de B. Radcliffe, who had succeeded Major-General Sir F. B. Maurice as Director of Military Operations at the War Office (Major-General C. H. Harrington took the place of Major-General Sir R. D. Whigham as Deputy C.I.G.S. on 12th April), prepared for the information of the C.I.G.S., states : " The Forward and Battle Zones "were partially wired, and a beginning had been made towards preparing "certain localities for defence, but the rest of the main line of defences in "the Rear Zone was only spit-locked". The compiler of this volume, who was sent by the Engineer-in-Chief on 14th March, with Br.-General H. Biddulph, R.E., to report on the Fifth Army defences, found that the front line only of the Rear Zone was marked out by a continuous ribbon of trench, 7 feet wide and a foot deep, with occasional small belts of wire (tactical wire sited for sweeping by machine guns ; protective wire was to follow later). The sites for machine guns and strongpoints were marked by notice boards.

A report of the Fifth Army dated 10th March stated that on that date work was organized and proceeding on all sectors except the Rear Zone and the Emergency Line along the western bank of the Somme.

<sup>2</sup> See, besides Sketches 2 and 3, Sketch 9, which gives details of part of the Fifth Army front, and Sketch 10, which gives details of a large and a small strongpoint.

them. Thus the defences of the zone depended on fire-effect, but the garrison, especially in the Fifth Army, was altogether too weak to make an effective stand against a determined assault. Defence by dotting posts over an area can rarely be more than temporary, and the posts will fall unless there is a counter-attack force, which advances after the enemy has become engaged. The object of the Forward Zone was, however, limited as already mentioned, and designed, at least in theory, to delay the advance of the enemy and oblige him to deploy in force wherever he intended to breach the defences. It was in fact an Outpost Zone, but not to be given up without a struggle.

The Battle Zone defences, also, were normally organized in three defensive lines, or rather systems : front, intermediate and rear, with communication and switch lines connecting them. Special portions of trench in these systems, and posts between them, were prepared for all-round fire. Here also the defence was intended to depend on a number of centres of resistance rather than on a continuous line of trench. The intention to accept battle in this zone was, in the case of the Fifth Army, subject to the special instructions issued by G.H.Q. on the 9th February, which contemplated, in certain circumstances, a retirement to the Somme Line.<sup>1</sup>

The infantry was disposed in depth, in accordance with the general instructions of the Commander-in-Chief, the method by which brigades and battalions were allotted between the Forward and Battle Zones varying according to local conditions and the views of different commanders.<sup>2</sup> In some cases all three brigades (now of three battalions) of a division were in the line, in others one brigade was held back in divisional or corps reserve. Some brigades disposed one battalion in the Forward Zone, one in the Battle Zone and one in brigade or divisional reserve ; others arranged each battalion in depth. Broadly speaking, however, excluding troops kept in reserve by corps and higher formations, there was about one-third (36 out of 110 battalions in all) of the infantry and pioneers of the divisions in the line in the Forward Zone of the Fifth Army, and much the same proportion in the Third Army (27½ out of 80 in the three corps engaged), although in this Army

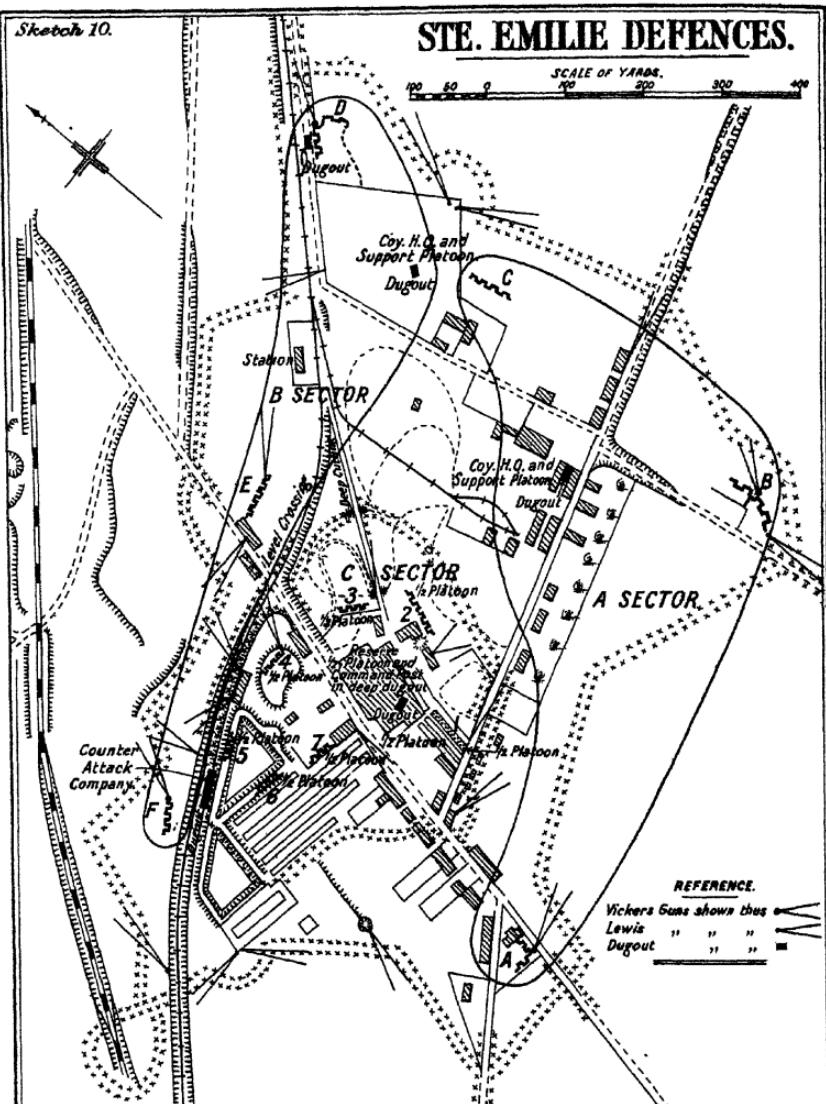
<sup>1</sup> See page 98.

<sup>2</sup> Details are given below. Some general remarks on the system of defence are made at end of Chapter X. in reviewing the results of the battle on 21st March.



Sketch 10.

# STE. EMILIE DEFENCES.



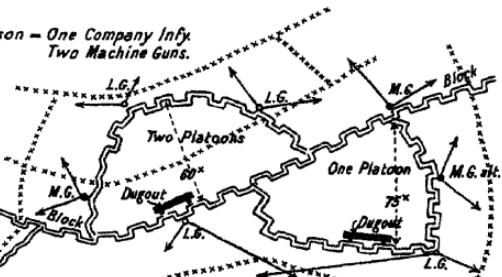
## STRONG POINT NEAR QUEEN'S CROSS.

Garrison - One Company Infy.  
Two Machine Guns.

Existing work shown in Black  
Proposed " " " Red

SCALE OF YARDS.  
50 25 0 50

Traverses on flanks 18'  
with 2' berms and  
12' firebays.



a somewhat stiffer resistance in that zone was contemplated.<sup>1</sup>

Guns, machine guns and trench mortars were also disposed in depth. The tasks allotted to the artillery were normal, that is, counter-battery work (neutralizing and destroying the hostile artillery); shelling important points behind the enemy's lines, such as roads, approaches, railway junctions, dumps and probable billeting areas; concentrating fire on the German assembly trenches when there were reasons to suppose that they were occupied in readiness for attack; and barrages in front of the British defences at the first signs of an immediate infantry attack. Gun positions were fixed in reference to these tasks and with a view to cover and concealment, with alternative and rearward positions in case the Forward Zone should be lost. About two-thirds of the artillery were placed inside the Battle Zone, some field guns, including a few anti-tank guns, being pushed further forward, and some of the heavier guns left further back. Some batteries, for the purpose of concealment, were ordered to remain silent until the battle opened. As a general principle, it was laid down that the intensity of fire should be superior to that of the enemy, and fire should continue as long as the hostile bombardment lasted.

During the period of preparation, the Forward Zone was kept manned with its fighting garrison, but in the Battle Zone troops were maintained only in the more important defences, the remainder of those allotted to it being kept in rear under such cover as was available, until there should be evident signs of an imminent attack. All precautions, including the carrying out of rehearsals, were taken to ensure that when it became necessary to "man battle stations" there would be no delay or hitch in moving units thus held back into the defences assigned to them.<sup>2</sup>

The general distribution of the troops of the Fifth and Third Armies from south to north was as follows :

<sup>1</sup> The rifle strength of the battalions varied; but, after deducting men who were sick or wounded, specially employed, temporarily held back as reinforcements and on leave, the average fighting strength of battalions actually in the defences may be taken at 500 rifles. The grant of leave was continued up to the eve of the offensive, in view of its great restorative effect and the probably long-drawn-out character of the coming German offensive, the leave men being regarded as reinforcements.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 17, which gives the Fifth Army Warning Order of 25th Feb. 1918, and Appendix 18, which gives "Arrangements for the Demolition of Bridges, etc."

**Map 1.** The Fifth Army (General Sir H. de la P. Gough), headquarters at Nesle, had four corps in the line :  
**Sketch 5.**

III. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir R. H. K. Butler), headquarters at Ugny le Gay ; 3 divisions, 106 heavy guns and 5 Army brigades R.F.A.<sup>1</sup>

XVIII. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir I. Maxse), headquarters at Ham ; 3 divisions, 129 heavy guns and 4 Army brigades R.F.A.

XIX. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir H. E. Watts), headquarters at Le Catelet ; 2 divisions, 130 heavy guns and 8 Army brigades R.F.A.

VII. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir W. N. Congreve), headquarters at Templeux la Fosse ; 3 divisions, 150 heavy guns, and 6 Army brigades R.F.A.

The 11 divisions of these corps were all in the line. The 50th (Northumbrian) Division, which had arrived in the Army area from Flanders on the 11th March, was in Army reserve near Cayeux (30 miles west of St. Quentin) ; the three divisions of the Cavalry Corps (Lieut.-General Sir C. T. McM. Kavanagh) were distributed by divisions along the front as reserves.

The three battalions of tanks allotted to the Army were near Tincourt, in the Cologne valley, on the boundary of the XIX. and VII. Corps, seven miles from the front, with a forward detachment of twelve tanks in the neighbourhood of Epéhy, in the centre of the front of the Battle Zone of the VII. Corps.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Army brigades R.F.A. were reserves not allotted to divisions ; their composition was the same as that of divisional brigades.

Distribution of artillery (G.O.C. R.A., Major-General H. C. C. Uniacke) :—

	Field guns and hows.	60- pdrs.	6-inch guns	8- inch hows.	9.2-inch hows.	12- inch hows.	15- inch hows.	gun
III. Corps	250	24	8	48	12	..	12	2
XVIII. "	282	24	8	64	12	1	18	2
XIX. "	236	24	8	66	12	3	17	..
VII. "	283	30	4	76	23	..	14	2
	1,051	102	28	254	59	4	61	1

515

Before 21st March the field artillery of the XIX. and VII. Corps was increased to 284 and 336 respectively, and in the VII. Corps the totals of the heavy guns raised to read : 36 ; 4 ; 82 ; 24 ; 14 ; 6 ; 1.

<sup>2</sup> At the Army Commanders' conference of 2nd March 1918, the employment of tanks was discussed, and the Commander-in-Chief laid down :—

" The principle of the employment of tanks in as great numbers as

In view of the very long front allotted to his Army, the nature of the ground and the enemy's probable action,<sup>1</sup> General Gough held his right lightly, keeping his main strength in the centre and on the left. Accordingly a front of 31,000 yards out of the total of 72,000 was allotted to the III. Corps.

In the III. Corps, for the same reasons which influenced Map 2. the dispositions of the Army commander, Lieut.-General Butler kept his main strength on his left, holding the line of the Oise lightly. His line, beginning in the Forest of St. Gobain, crossed the Oise, then followed its course and ended on the higher ground between the river and the St. Quentin canal.

On the right of the corps, the 58th (2/1st London) Division (Major-General A. B. E. Cator) had a front of 16,000 yards. Two brigades and the pioneer battalion were placed south of the Oise, with  $2\frac{1}{2}$  battalions in the Forward Zone,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  in the Battle Zone and 2 behind, and one brigade north of the river. This last, the 173rd Brigade, allotted one battalion to the Forward Zone, which had thus about 7000 yards to watch; another battalion was in the Battle Zone,<sup>2</sup> with a special post in Condren, a village which commanded the Oise valley; the third was in divisional reserve just behind the Green Line.

The 18th (Eastern) Division (Major-General R. P. Lee), continued the front for almost 10,000 yards along the Oise. One brigade, the 54th, was in corps reserve, one battalion

"possible for the purpose of counter-attack will generally be observed, "and in this connection the training of reserve troops with tanks is of "great importance. In certain special cases, however, where the ground "is suitable, it may be advisable to employ a few tanks from concealed "positions on reverse slopes, or in valleys, as mobile machine-gun units."

At this period the radius of action of a tank was only 20 to 25 miles, and the petrol supply on a wide front presented great difficulties.

<sup>1</sup> It was expected, quite correctly as it turned out, that the weight of the attack would fall between St. Quentin and the Scarpe, with the capture of the Flesquieres salient as the first main objective. Whatever his front of attack might be, the enemy would have to form strong defensive flanks as he progressed, and on his left the high ground north and north-west of St. Quentin would provide him with a good defensive position. If the front of attack extended further southwards, the line of the Crozat canal from Tergnier on the Oise to St. Simon on the Somme and thence along the Somme westwards—as actually fixed by Ludendorff—was evidently so suitable that it was doubted whether any serious attempt to push beyond that line would be made in the first stages of the advance.

<sup>2</sup> In all divisions, part of the divisional engineers had stations in the Battle Zone: their distribution and those of the machine guns and trench mortar units are not given in view of economy of space. The general distribution is shown on the maps.

three miles north, and 2, three miles west, of Chauny. The other two brigades had 3 battalions in the Forward Zone, and 3, with the pioneer battalion, near the Green Line ready to man the Battle Zone.

The 14th (Light) Division (Major-General Sir V. A. Couper), on the left of the corps, held a much shorter front of about 5,500 yards, half of it between the Oise and the St. Quentin canal. The ground it occupied was protected by no natural obstacle, was overlooked to some extent by the enemy's lines, and was of considerable tactical importance, commanding as it did the lines of defence to the south and north of it and the country south-westwards towards the Crozat canal. The three brigades of this division were in line, with 3 battalions in the Forward Zone, 5 and the pioneer battalion in and behind the Battle Zone, and one battalion near the Green line.

To sum up, the III. Corps had  $9\frac{1}{2}$  battalions in the Forward Zone,  $13\frac{1}{2}$  in or near the Battle Zone and 7 behind it.

The 2nd Cavalry Division (Major-General W. H. Greenly) was in corps reserve, with two brigades, about eight miles behind the right, north of the Oise, and the third behind the Crozat canal (at Jussy).

The 20th (Light) Division (Major-General W. Douglas Smith) in G.H.Q. reserve, was stationed near Libermont, about fourteen miles behind the centre of the III. Corps front.

The front of the XVIII. Corps was 16,000 yards ; it included the semicircle of some 3,000 yards radius passing through the outskirts of St. Quentin, and enclosing that town on the west. From some of the buildings of St. Quentin much of the British position was overlooked, a source of serious danger since the town was capable of concealing a large number of German troops ; in consequence it had been bombarded with gas shell on the 19th March.

The 36th (Ulster) Division (Major-General O. S. W. Nugent) on the right had a front of some 6,000 yards, astride the St. Quentin canal in the Battle Zone ; but this waterway crossed the divisional front diagonally forming in the Forward Zone its left boundary. The three brigades were in line, each with one battalion in the Forward Zone, one in the Battle Zone, and one, in divisional reserve, near Grand Seraucourt close behind the latter zone. The pioneer battalion was divided between the three groups.

The 30th Division (Major-General W. de L. Williams) in

the centre of the corps on the forward slopes of the high ground west of St. Quentin, held 4,000 yards in the Forward Zone and about 5,000 in the Battle Zone. One brigade (89th) was in corps reserve in and behind the Green Line, with the pioneer battalion ; the other two brigades had each one battalion in the Forward Zone and 2 in the Battle Zone.

The 61st (2nd South Midland) Division (Major-General C. J. Mackenzie) covered a front of about 6,000 yards, mostly on the reverse slopes of a spur running north from St. Quentin. Its three brigades were in line, each with one battalion in the Forward Zone, one in the forward part of the Battle Zone, and one, with the pioneer battalion, in reserve in the rear of that zone.

Of the 30 battalions, including pioneers, in the corps, there were thus 8-1/3rd in the Forward Zone, 14-1/3rd in the Battle Zone and 7-1/3rd behind it.

The 3rd Cavalry Division (Major-General A. E. W. Harman), in Army reserve, was posted near Athies, eastward of St. Christ on the Somme, behind the XVIII. Corps.

The front of the XIX. Corps, approximately 12,000 yards in length, included the valley of the Omignon, and extended thence along the southern spurs of the watershed to the upper valley of the Cologne river.

The 24th Division (Major-General A. C. Daly), on the right, held some 7,000 yards of front, and the 66th (2nd East Lancashire) Division (Major-General N. Malcolm) the remainder. Of the six brigades, one, the 73rd of the 24th Division, was kept in corps reserve, in the centre behind the Green Line ; the other five were in line, their battalions being distributed like those of the 61st Division just mentioned, and the pioneer battalions divided up. There were thus, it may be said, 6 battalions in the Forward Zone, 11 in the Battle Zone and 3 behind it.

The 1st Cavalry Division (Major-General R. L. Mullens), in the Péronne area, was at the disposal of the XIX. Corps as reserve, and to the northward of the town, behind the VII. Corps, was the 89th Division (Major-General E. Feetham) in G.H.Q. reserve.

The VII. Corps, forming the left wing of the Fifth Map 3. Army, connected with the Third Army near Gouzeaucourt and held a line on high ground, broken into by several valleys, which fell eastwards to the canalized Upper Schelde two miles away. Its front of about 15,000 yards was divided nearly equally between its three divisions : the

16th (South Irish) (Major-General Sir A. Hull); the 21st (Major-General D. G. M. Campbell); and the 9th (Scottish) (Br.-General H. H. Tudor in temporary command). Each division had one brigade and the pioneer battalion in reserve. The 16th Division, of its 6 battalions thus left available, had no less than 5 and the 21st and 9th Divisions 4 each in the Forward Zone, leaving only 5 for the corps Battle Zone. This strong manning of the Forward Zone was judged necessary on account of the short field of view on the high ground, on which the front line had settled down after the Battle of Cambrai, and the ease with which the enemy could mass in the defile, through which the Schelde canal ran close at hand, free from ground observation.

In total, then, the Fifth Army had 36-5/6th battalions in the Forward Zone, 43-5/6th in the Battle Zone, and 29-1/3rd behind it.

The Third Army (General Hon. Sir J. H. G. Byng), headquarters at Albert, also had four corps in the line: V. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir E. A. Fanshawe), headquarters at Villers au Flos; 5 divisions, 128 heavy guns and one Army brigade R.F.A.<sup>1</sup>

IV. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir G. M. Harper), headquarters at Grevillers; 3 divisions and 98 heavy guns.

VI. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir A. Haldane), headquarters at Bretencourt; 3 divisions, 132 heavy guns and 2 Army brigades R.F.A.

XVII. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir C. Fergusson), headquarters at Duisans; 3 divisions and 103 heavy guns.

With a much shorter front than the Fifth Army, the Third had four of its fourteen divisions in reserve, in contrast to the former Army's smaller reserve of one division and three cavalry divisions. Of the total reserve of six divisions, including the two of the G.H.Q. reserve, in the

<sup>1</sup> Distribution of artillery (G.O.C.R.A., Major-General R. St. C. Lecky):

	Field guns and hows.	60- pdrs.	6-inch guns	8- inch hows.	9.2-inch guns	12- inch hows.	15- inch how.
V. Corps .	192	19	8	62	19	..	15
IV. " .	144	24	..	52	10	2	6
VI. " .	192	21	8	67	12	2	18
XVII. " .	181	32	4	86	11	1	14
	659	96	20	217	52	5	58
						15	8

Army area, four, the 2nd, 19th, 25th, and 40th (G.H.Q. reserve, Major-General J. Ponsonby) were strung out ten miles behind the right, near the Green Line, the Guards Division (Major-General G. P. T. Feilding) was behind the left, and the 41st (G.H.Q. reserve, Major-General Sir S. T. B. Lawford)<sup>1</sup> some twenty-five miles behind the centre, near Doullens.

Four battalions of tanks were with the Army, three on the right near Vélu (5 miles east of Bapaume), and one on the left south-west of Arras.

The V. Corps held the Flesquières Salient. Its front, Sketch 4, 15,000 yards long, was the line on which the Third Army had settled down after the Battle of Cambrai, on the high ground, including the long narrow ridge on which Flesquières stands, west of the Schelde canal; it was broken into by the valleys which lead up to Villers Plouich and Ribecourt (the latter known as Grand Ravine), besides smaller ones. The Battle Zone formed a retrenchment across the base of the salient, but besides this an "Intermediate Line" had been dug between the two front zones, which served as a switch to the salient. Two of the five divisions of the corps, the 2nd (Major-General C. E. Pereira)<sup>2</sup> and the 19th (Major-General G. D. Jeffreys) were in corps reserve, the latter at Army disposal.

On the right, in the Flesquières Salient, was the 47th (1/2nd London) Division (Major-General Sir G. F. Gorringe), with a front of nearly 5,000 yards facing east and north-east; it had two brigades in the line ( $3\frac{1}{2}$  battalions in the Forward Zone and the rest in and behind the Intermediate Line), and one, with the pioneer battalion, in reserve in the rear part of the Battle Zone.

The 63rd (Royal Naval) Division (Major-General C. E. Lawrie), next on the left, in the Flesquières Salient, facing north-east, held about 6,000 yards. Its three brigades were in line. There were 3 battalions in the Forward Zone and

<sup>1</sup> Nominally still in the Versailles General Reserve.

<sup>2</sup> The 2nd Division had been in the right half of the Flesquières Salient, but had suffered heavy casualties, practically the whole division being more or less affected, from mustard gas shelling 10th-16th March, but principally on the 12th. The infantry, engineers and pioneers therefore had been relieved on 19th/20th and 20th/21st March by the 47th Division. Its artillery and machine gunners remained in the line. The 47th Division artillery did not accompany its infantry, was used elsewhere and did not rejoin the division until May.

The 63rd (R.N.) Division, in the left half of the Salient, had not suffered quite so severely as the 2nd, but had had 2,580 casualties in the week ending 16th March.

3, with the pioneers, in the Intermediate Line, and the others in divisional reserve at the back of the Battle Zone.

The 17th (Northern) Division (Major-General P. R. Robertson), held the remaining 4,000 yards of the corps front, with two brigades in the line (4 battalions in the Forward Zone, 1½ in the Intermediate Line, and half a battalion in the Battle Zone), and one brigade, with the pioneer battalion in reserve in the Battle Zone.

Thus in the corps line there were 10½ battalions in the Forward Zone, 8 (one pioneer) in the Intermediate Line, half a battalion in the Green Line, and the rest (11) in the Battle Zone.

The IV. Corps held a front of approximately 12,000 yards with two divisions, its third, the 25th, being in reserve. Its defences, sited far down the northern face of the watershed, including the western end of the Flesquière ridge, ran across a series of spurs and valleys which sink gradually to the chain of marshes and ponds through which passes the Sensée eight to ten miles beyond the British front. No Man's Land on the left was about 400 yards across, but on the rest of the corps front it was much wider, the enemy line being half a mile to one mile from the British, entailing on the Germans a long advance over exposed ground.

The 51st (Highland) Division (Major-General G. T. C. Carter-Campbell) held over 6,000 yards on the right of the corps front, across the great Bapaume—Cambrai road, its left resting on the prominent spur north of Louverval Chateau, which was described in the Defence Scheme as a vulnerable spot, owing to the amount of dead ground at this end, and liable to be turned by an advance up the valley west of it. All three brigades were in line, each with 2 battalions divided between the Forward and Battle Zones, and the others with the pioneers in reserve in front of the Green Line.

The 6th Division (Major-General T. O. Marden) continued the line for the remaining 6,000 yards across an undulating front, the right of which faced Bourlon Wood, and the left, ending on the long Quéant spur, looked down on Quéant village in the valley of the Hirondelle stream. The infantry was distributed like that of the 51st Division.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The 11/Essex, the reserve battalion of the right brigade, was employed in digging rear defences until the last moment, and only reached its assembly position, behind Morchies, on the rear edge of the Battle Zone, at 7 A.M. on 21st March, after a 10-mile march.

Thus the IV. Corps had roughly 6 battalions in the Forward Zone and 14 in and close behind the Battle Zone.

The VI. Corps had a front of some 13,000 yards over vale and spur, divided more or less equally into three sectors. Starting on the Quéant spur, the front line crossed the Ecoust valley, with Bullecourt in the Forward Zone, and then the valleys of the Sensée (nearly dry) and the Cojeul (with a little water in it). East and outside of the British line, the Quéant spur formed four projecting fingers : the left one, running northward, with Riencourt on it, was a dangerous feature, as it gave the enemy observation over a good part of the British front area, and offered excellent cover for assembling troops.

According to information gleaned from prisoners, the high ground north of Croisilles on the spurs running northward behind the British front between the Sensée and Cojeul valleys, known as Henin Hill, which overlooked the communications to the south of Arras, was to be the enemy's first objective on the VI. Corps front : his intention was in the first instance to throw the weight of his attack against the Bullecourt sector (the village lies midway between Croisilles and Riencourt) and then swing northwards. This procedure would enable him to utilize the shelter of the Riencourt spur in the first stage of the attack and make it unnecessary to expose the right flank of the attack to view from the dominating ridge of Monchy le Preux (held by the XVII. Corps) in his subsequent movement against Henin Hill.

The 59th (2nd North Midland) Division (Major-General C. F. Romer), on the right, was disposed with two brigades in the line (4 battalions in the Forward Zone and the other 2 in the front part of the Battle Zone) and the third brigade (less one battalion in the Battle Zone) and the pioneer battalion were in divisional reserve behind the Green Line.

The 34th Division (Major-General C. L. Nicholson) came next, and was disposed practically in similar fashion to the 59th.

The 3rd Division (Major-General C. J. Deverell) had all its three brigades in line, with a total of 4 battalions in the Forward Zone, and the others, with the pioneers, in the front part of the Battle Zone. The front of the left brigade was partly covered by a shallow inundation formed by damming the Cojeul stream inside the front line, so that its waters spread right and left.

The VI. Corps had in all 12 battalions in the Forward Zone, 14 in the Battle Zone and 4 in reserve.

The XVII. Corps held one division, the Guards in reserve. The other two, the 15th (Major-General H. L. Reed) and the 4th (Major-General T. G. Matheson) both had all their brigades in the line ; but, as no infantry attack took place on this front on the 21st March, it is unnecessary at this stage to give the disposition of their battalions.

In the Third Army the three corps which were attacked, had in all eight divisions in the line, with  $28\frac{1}{2}$  of the 80 battalions in the Forward Zone,  $47\frac{1}{2}$  in and close to the Battle Zone (including 8 in the Intermediate Line) and 4 in reserve.

The general instructions to the corps commanders from General Byng were that a stout fight should be made in the Forward Zone, but if the attack was made in great force the main defence should be made in the Battle Zone. Special precautions were to be taken to guard the numerous valleys up which the enemy was likely to press his advance.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE GERMAN PLANS AND PREPARATIONS<sup>1</sup>

(Sketches 6, 11, 12, 13)

IN spite of the failure on the Yser and before Ypres in October-November 1914, the German General Staff had never abandoned hope of breaking the Allied front in the West and there bringing about a decision. In an O.H.L. appreciation dated the 28th October 1917 it is stated "The "guiding principle of our general military situation remains "for the future as in the past [*nach wie vor*] that the "decision lies in the Western theatre of War".<sup>2</sup> Where best to make the attempt, as soon as sufficient troops could be assembled as a striking force, continuously occupied their attention in 1915, 1916 and 1917. In the closing days of 1914, when it was calculated that  $4\frac{1}{2}$  new corps with  $1\frac{1}{2}$  corps drawn from the Russian front might be made available for the West, General von Falkenhayn, then Chief of the General Staff, took the opinion of Generals Wild von Hohenborn (his Deputy and, later, War Minister) and Schmidt von Knobelsdorff (the Crown Prince's Chief of the Staff) as to whether a "war-decisive success" could be achieved with these six corps. They agreed that the engagement of this force in Champagne, or on both sides of the Argonne, might drive the French back to the Marne and make the capture of Verdun possible: but that no more than this could be expected. General von Hohenborn particularly pointed out the advantages of attacking in the direction of Amiens, so as to separate the French and the British; but he opined that in February the operation could not be accomplished with six corps, while in March there would be less chance even with twelve corps; for

<sup>1</sup> For the examination of the question of the responsibility for the German decision to take the offensive, and the sources of information as to the German plan, see Appendix 19.

<sup>2</sup> Fehr, p. 9.

by that time the French and the British would also have organized new formations. Falkenhayn concurred in the view that Amiens was the right direction of attack, but added that there was no hope of finding twelve corps, for "the East gives nothing back". He was doubtful, moreover, whether six corps would be enough to gain even a local success at Verdun. No action was taken, as in the end the 4½ new corps, to satisfy the importunities of Hindenburg, were despatched to the Eastern Front.

In March 1915, after Falkenhayn's return from the Eastern Front, when the organization of further new corps had been taken in hand, so that a striking force of 14 extra divisions should be available, he ordered a thorough examination of the prospects of an offensive. He posed the questions : what sector of the Western Front offered the best hopes of a decisive success, if a break-through could be effected there ; and what forces and material, particularly heavy guns and ammunition, would such an operation require. The General Staffs of the *Sixth Army* (Soissons sector) and *First Army* (Lille sector) had already undertaken elaborate studies in this matter. General Krafft von Dellmensingen, Chief of the Staff of the *Sixth Army* (who was later to plan and execute the Caporetto operation)—Wild von Hohenborn agreeing with him—proposed a plan which contains several elements of that adopted in 1918. He advocated breaking through and smashing the northern wing of the Allied line, "in the first place, therefore, the 'British Army'". As the forces likely to be available would be too small to extend to the Somme, however desirable it might be to use that river as flank protection, and because the main object was to separate the British from the French, he suggested attacking the French nearest to the British right. Thus the main offensive would be made on both sides of Arras,<sup>1</sup> and directed north-westwards along the high ground towards the coast between Calais and Boulogne, whilst a subsidiary attack would be directed against Kemmel. For left flank protection, the line Albert—Doullens and the course of the river Authie could be utilized.

General von Kuhl, Chief of the Staff of the *First Army*, first examined and decided against an offensive in the direction of Roye, which had been put forward by General von Kluck in October 1914, and was carried out by Hutier's

<sup>1</sup> At this time the British front extended on the south no further than the La Bassée canal.

Army in 1918, as we shall see. He adduced as reasons that, if successful, such an attack would drive the British back to a great half-circle round Boulogne—Calais—Dunkirk, and force the French left to a line Beauvais—Rouen or Dieppe, so that two new frontal attacks would be necessary. Kuhl selected the Aisne front, where the *Chemin des Dames* offensive was to fall in May 1918, strongly insisting on surprise: he had in his mind a lightning blow with overwhelming force.

Falkenhayn also called for proposals from Colonel von Seeckt, the Chief of the Staff of the new *Eleventh Army*, which he intended to use in the offensive. The plan actually followed in 1918, as will be seen, had a close resemblance to Seeckt's, which was conceived on a larger scale than Dellmensingen's. Seeckt proposed to attack somewhere between the Somme and Arras, and then, although a 120-mile front was to be prepared for assault by artillery, to make the actual break-through on a 15-mile front in the Thiepval—Ficheux sector, with possibly a subsidiary attack north of Arras. The assaulting troops, whose right wing was to turn north-west, were to be followed by reserves, which would cover the left flank and hold the line of the Somme against French assistance coming from the south. What course should next be followed must depend on the measures taken by the Allies, but Seeckt anticipated that the German centre and left would also turn northwards and deal with the isolated portion of the Allied Army north of the break-through, the reserves holding the Somme against the French.

Colonel Tappen (Operations Section), Colonel Lossberg (temporarily in the Operations Section) and Major-General Moser (a well-known military writer, then convalescing after a wound, later a corps commander), also drew up proposals, which, however, are not available.

But all these plans came to nothing, since the *Eleventh Army*, which Falkenhayn hoped to use in France, had to be sent to the assistance of the Austrians, and broke the Russian front at Gorlice-Tarnow in May 1915; from that time onward until Russia showed definite signs of collapse, the Supreme Command, whilst always keeping the attack on the French and British in mind, could see no prospect of finding the men and material for a decisive effort against them. The attack on Verdun in February 1916, with limited means and a limited objective, and the vain efforts of the Allies to effect a break-through, gave clear indication that nothing

decisive could be expected unless the General Staff could organize a surprise attack on a wide front, supported by an immense artillery force, and backed up by large reserves to exploit the initial success.

On the 23rd October 1917, the day before the battle of Caporetto, the Operations Section of the Supreme Command put forward proposals for an offensive on the Western Front in 1918. But not until the success of the offensive in Italy was assured, and it grew obvious that the French and the British must send divisions to the assistance of the Italian Army, thereby reducing their reserves, and not until it was evident that Russia would shortly be out of the War, did Ludendorff take the matter definitely in hand. It was the failure of Italy and Russia which brought about the crisis ; as will presently be seen, Ludendorff did not give the final decision for the great offensive until the 21st January 1918, when it was quite certain that hostilities on the Eastern Front had ceased.

To discuss plans for 1918, he summoned General von Kuhl and Colonel von der Schulenberg, the Chiefs of the Staff of the Groups of Armies of Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria and the German Crown Prince, to a conference at Mons (Crown Prince Rupprecht's headquarters) on the 11th November : fatal place and fatal date for Germany's hopes.<sup>1</sup>

At the conference, General von Kuhl spoke in favour of an offensive in Flanders in the direction Bailleul—Hazebrouck, its left flank being covered by the La Bassée canal, in order to cut off the British. The latter were massed, he pointed out, in a very unfavourable strategic situation, with the sea on the north and west close behind them : the only condition unfavourable to the attack was that, in winter, the Lys valley was flooded and difficult to cross, so that the operation could not be carried out before April. To this Ludendorff, setting aside tactical considerations, objected that the attack must take place at the latest at the end of February or beginning of March, in order to anticipate the Allies.

<sup>1</sup> It is not without interest to note that neither the Kaiser nor the Crown Prince, nor even Hindenburg, was present at this momentous conference ; nor did they take part in the discussions which followed it. Crown Prince Rupprecht had a short conversation with Ludendorff before the conference (Rupprecht, ii. pp. 285-6), but does not seem to have been present at it, and certainly did not speak.

The decisions were taken by the General Staff, under the final covering authority of the Kaiser, without the slightest reference to or interference from the Government in Berlin.

Colonel von der Schulenberg then advocated an attack against the French. England, he said, would never be driven to make peace by the defeat of one of her Armies ; if the power of the French were broken by a heavy defeat, it would be another matter : he therefore proposed an attack on both sides of Verdun. He was supported by Lieut.-Colonel Wetzell (Head of the Operations Section of the General Staff), who thought that the French should be attacked ; that the Verdun salient alone on the Western Front offered conditions which promised far-reaching results if the offensive were to prove successful ; that the French would not recover from a serious blow ; that a victory at or near Verdun would have an immense effect on the French nation and the Entente peoples ; that it would prevent any chance of a French-American offensive in the spring, and that after such a victory the whole German Army could, if necessary, be turned against the British.

On this proposal General Ludendorff remarked that the British would not be compelled to send assistance to the French at Verdun, and that most likely he would find that he had a second battle, in Flanders, on his hands. He asked whether Crown Prince Rupprecht's Group could not attack somewhere south of Flanders, say at Arras or St. Quentin ; but General von Kuhl was against such a course.

Ludendorff summed up at the conclusion of the conference as follows :—

The situation in Russia and Italy will, as far as can be seen, make it possible to deliver a blow on the Western Front in the new year. The strength of the two sides will be approximately equal. About thirty-five divisions and one thousand heavy guns can be made available for an offensive. That will suffice for *one* offensive ; a second great simultaneous offensive, say as a diversion, will not be possible.

Our general situation requires that we should strike at the earliest moment, if possible at the end of February or beginning of March, before the Americans can throw strong forces into the scale.

We must beat the British.

The operations must be based on these three conditions.

He then proceeded to deal with the proposal for the Hazebrouck operation—known as “St. George” and later as “George”—against the flank and rear of the British, which he admitted would be effective, although the difficulties of the ground were a great obstacle ; it was

also dependent on the weather, and could not be made early enough. To gain time, the French might be held fast by a diversion, e.g., near Verdun to cut off the salient, and then the British could be attacked. But the forces and munitions required for this were beyond his means. He enquired whether favourable conditions for operations could not be found further to the south : “*in particular “an attack near St. Quentin appeared promising. After “gaining the Somme line, Ham—Péronne, operations could “be carried further in a north-westerly direction, with the left “flank resting on the Somme, and lead to the rolling up of the “British front”.*

Here is the basic idea of the so-called “Michael” operation—Seeckt’s old plan of 1915—later ordered and carried out. But nothing was settled on the 11th November as the situation in Russia was still uncertain, so the three General Staff officers separated to study the problem.

Kuhl, however, supported by Crown Prince Rupprecht, did not abandon the idea of the offensive in Flanders, arguing that the bulk of the British forces were there concentrated in a small area which was dangerously restricted by the sea. On the 20th November he forwarded a long memorandum to Ludendorff in which he said that they must reckon on a continuation of the British offensive in Flanders in 1918, and also on a great French offensive : the Germans dare not limit themselves to the defensive : “defensive battles, from long experience, brought more “losses than the attack” : the defeat of the enemy would be best attained by an attack at Estaires—Armentières (extended in the course of the memorandum to Festubert—Frélinghien, 3 miles north-east of Armentières), via Bailleul—Hazebrouck, against the flank and rear of the British in and west of the Ypres Salient : this was the best way to counter the Entente offensive in Flanders and protect the U-boat bases : there were certainly difficulties of ground in the Lys valley, but on this account the enemy would not expect an attack at that point, in fact, part of the front there was occupied by the Portuguese : the line of the La Bassée canal could be held to stop the arrival of French help : if the British should be the first to attack in Flanders, the German line must be withdrawn slowly.

Kuhl declared himself against an attack in the neighbourhood of Arras : it was too difficult, as the Allies were still holding Vimy ridge and other high ground : an attack from the neighbourhood of St. Quentin had the advantage

that it could be made at any time of the year, and the Allied positions, except south of St. Quentin, were not strongly built, and for the moment were weakly held : on the other hand, to hold off the French and at the same time roll up the British north-westwards required large forces, much larger than required for "St. George" : it could not be foreseen how the enemy would act if the break-through succeeded : it should not be overlooked that the attack must traverse the area devastated during the 1917 retirement : the German front from which the attack would be made faced south-west, but the first advance must be made westwards to the Somme, and then front changed to the north-west, a difficult operation to carry out during a battle.

On the 15th December, when it was clear that Russia was out of the War, General von Kuhl further urged the adoption of his "St. George" scheme, since it was now fairly certain that the British would not be able to take the offensive until the Americans had arrived in force, and there would no longer be any objection to postponing a German offensive until April.

A more important paper was handed in on the 12th December by Lieut.-Colonel Wetzell.<sup>1</sup> It began :

Any prospect of success in the West depends upon other principles than those which hold good for the East or against Italy. We must be quite clear what these principles are before estimating what is attainable in the light of our previous experience in the West and taking into account all human probabilities ; otherwise we shall be led astray and select objectives which, in view of the character of our opponents, we are not likely to reach.

We must bear in mind that in 1918 France will have a rested and strategically free Army, reinforced by Americans, and determined leaders, political (Clemenceau), as well as military.

The British will probably renew their attempts to obtain a decision in Flanders.

He then proceeded to examine the quality and strength of the Armies in question, the position of reserves and the possibility of reinforcements. Complete surprise, he argued, was out of the question, but a good "start" over the enemy might be gained : further success would depend on the speed of the operation. The prospects of success of the various attacks which had been suggested were then investigated.

Lieut.-Colonel Wetzell held that the Verdun attack was

<sup>1</sup> Translated in full in Appendix 20.

the most decisive ; on the other hand, if the British must be dealt with first, an attack in the direction of Hazebrouck offered good prospects ; but he had serious doubts as regards the success of a break-through on a grand scale near St. Quentin. He laid stress on the fact that the difficulties in the West were so great that a decisive break-through could hardly be attained by a single attack against only one sector of the front. It must be done by a sequence of consecutive attacks and rapid transference of troops : the offensive must in fact be carried out in two acts : in the first act the British reserves in Flanders must be drawn away by an attack against St. Quentin : the attack must, however, be pursued only to a certain fixed line, and must then be broken off : about a fortnight later the enemy front in Flanders, now deprived of reserves, should be attacked in the direction of Hazebrouck, in order first to set the whole British front tottering, and then to roll it up from the north.

Fortunately for us, Lieut.-Colonel Wetzell's proposals were not accepted, although, in the end, after the first offensive had come to a standstill, Ludendorff, bearing them in mind, did order the second act—too late.

Meantime, from the beginning of November 1917 onwards, the collection of ammunition and other material had been taken in hand, and the transfer of troops from East to West and from Italy steadily continued.<sup>1</sup> The total numbers of divisions in France and Belgium by the end of November rose from 150 to 160 ; by the end of December to 171 ; by the end of January it was 175 ; by the end of February, 180 ; and on the 21st March, 192 and 3 brigades.<sup>2</sup> A thorough course of training for the troops was ordered—including three weeks' divisional training—not only behind the Western Front, but also in Russia and

<sup>1</sup> Kuhl states that 8 divisions were transferred from Italy and 40 from the East (including Rumania) ; 4 of the latter had, however, only been sent in October-November from West to East, and 2 *Landwehr* divisions were transferred from West to East ; so that the total reinforcement was only 42 divisions.

<sup>2</sup> This left :

East and South-East . . . . .	58 divisions, 18 brigades ;
Balkans . . . . .	1 division ;
Turkey . . . . .	1 "
Home . . . . .	1 "

The comparative numbers were :

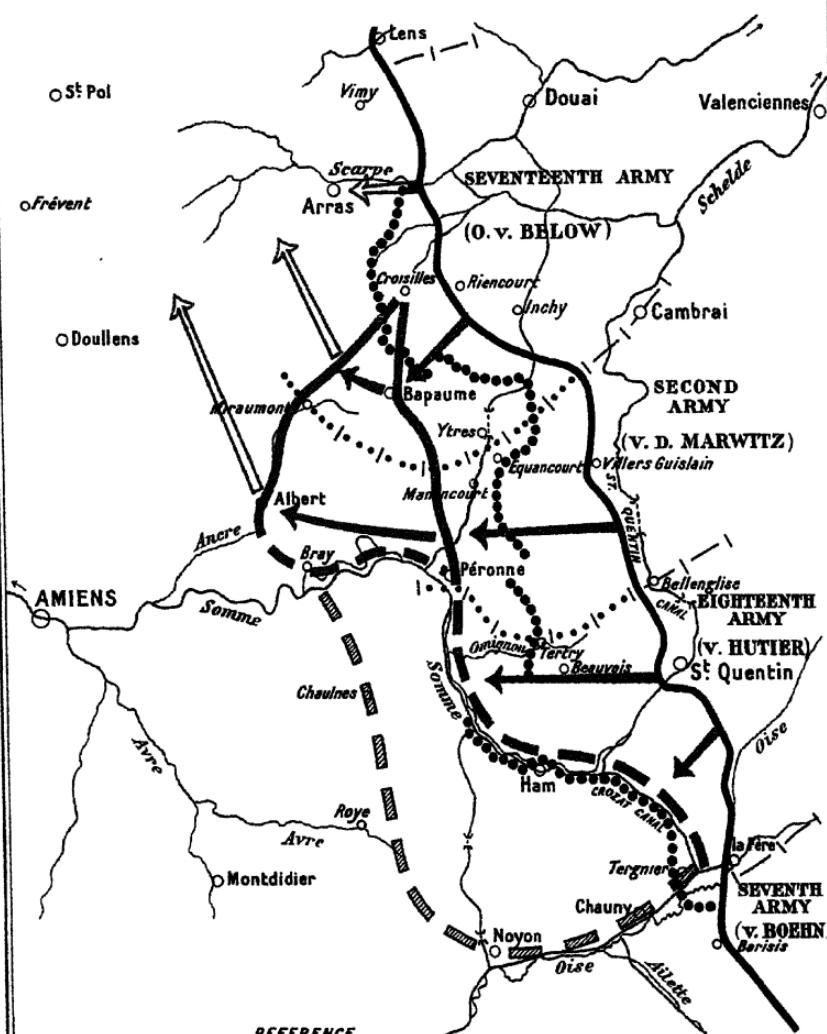
West . . . . .	136,618 officers ; 3,438,288 men ;
East . . . . .	40,095 officers ; 1,004,955 men.

It will be noticed that the number of German officers alone exceeded the whole total of the original British Expeditionary Force of August 1914.



Sketch 11.

## GERMAN PLAN FOR MARCH 1918.



### REFERENCE.

First stage ..... [solid black bar]  
Second " ..... [solid black bar]  
Third " ..... [solid black bar]  
Defensive flank ..... [arrow pointing left]  
Further advance contemplated by EIGHTEENTH ARMY ..... [dashed black bar]  
Army boundaries - 20<sup>th</sup> March ..... [thin black line]  
Army boundaries - during advance ..... [dotted black line]

British Front on 20<sup>th</sup> March ..... [solid black bar]  
" " " 23<sup>rd</sup> " a.m. ..... [dotted black line]

SCALE OF MILES.

10 5 0 10 20 30

Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch)

Ordnance Survey 193

Rumania, to which countries experienced officers were sent from the West to supervise the training of divisions earmarked for eventual transport. It was not found possible in the time available to equip and train every division for open warfare ; the best of them were therefore selected and relieved from duty in the trenches. Altogether, 56 divisions and a very large force of artillery were put through a special course of training. All men over 35 years of age were left in the East, and men of this category in the West were sent to the East, their places being taken by the younger men. Some indication of Ludendorff's thoughts was given towards the end of December when the troops in the southern sector of the *Second Army* (General von der Marwitz) near St. Quentin, from the Omignon to the Oise, were reorganized as a new *Eighteenth Army* front under General von Hutier, who had been brought from the Russian theatre.

On the 27th December there was a second conference between General Ludendorff and the Chiefs of the Staffs of the Groups of Armies. No final decision was come to ; but it was settled that Crown Prince Rupprecht's Group should make preparations for the "George" offensive near Armentières, perhaps combined with an attack near Ypres ("George 2"), also an attack near Arras ("Mars") and on both sides of St. Quentin ("Michael"). Smaller operations, including an offensive on both sides of Verdun and on the Strasbourg front were to be prepared by the other Groups of Armies. The preliminary work for all these operations was to be begun at once, so that the whole work could be completed by the 10th March 1918.

The final decision was given by Ludendorff on the 21st January 1918, after a tour of the Western Front in company with General von Kuhl and Colonel von der Schulenberg, in the course of which discussions respecting the various possibilities took place with the staffs of the *Fourth, Sixth, Second, Eighteenth and Seventh Armies*.

The First Quartermaster-General then declared that the attack "George" was too dependent on the weather : if there was a wet spring it might not be possible to execute it before May ; "Mars", near Arras, with the British in possession of Vimy ridge, was too difficult ; "Michael" (on both sides of St. Quentin) would be carried out, with its right wing extended to the Scarpe.<sup>1</sup> The *Eighteenth*

<sup>1</sup> After the War General Hoffmann, Ludendorff's assistant and successor on the Eastern Front, told British officers that the front of attack should have been from Arras to the sea.

*Army* would be transferred at the end of the month from Crown Prince Rupprecht's Group to that of the German Crown Prince.<sup>1</sup> This Army would have the task of covering the left flank of the attack by going forward to the Crozat canal and the Somme line Ham—Péronne. The decision would be obtained by the *Second* and *Seventeenth Armies*, the latter Army being interpolated between the *Second* and *Sixth Armies* between Cambrai and Lens, when General Otto von Below arrived from Italy at the end of the month.

Preliminary orders in accordance with this decision were issued on the 24th January, again on the 8th February, and a final order on the 10th March. The preliminary orders laid down which attacks were to be prepared, with the instruction that the preparations were to be pushed forward so that the "Michael" attack could take place about the 20th March.

**Sketches 6 and 11.** The general intention was that "Attack Michael should break through the enemy front with the objective La Fère (left flank, Ham—Péronne), and then, in combination with Mars South (Arras front), push forward to Péronne —Arras and beyond".

The *Seventeenth Army* with its left wing would carry out "Michael 1", in the direction of Bapaume; the *Second Army*, "Michael 2", towards Péronne; and the *Eighteenth Army*, "Michael 3", towards Ham.

The "Mars" attack (*Seventeenth Army*, right wing) would not take place until several days after "Michael", when the artillery required for it was free and had been re-grouped; only the part south of the Scarpe would be carried out, as there were not sufficient troops for the northern half.<sup>2</sup>

The preparations for the "George" attacks, "George 1" near Armentières, and "George 2" at Ypres,<sup>3</sup> would be

<sup>1</sup> The reason given for this transfer was that the division of the offensive operation between two Groups of Armies would give O.H.L. a greater measure of control, and enable it to settle the boundary between the *Eighteenth* and *Second Armies*, about which there had been a dispute. But dynastic reasons, jealousy of Crown Prince Rupprecht, the opportunity to call the final battle a "Kaiserschlacht", and the desire to give the German Crown Prince a share in the victory, may have contributed to the change.

<sup>2</sup> "Valkyrie (*Walkürenritt*)", shown on Sketch 6, was not planned until 26th March; it was an attack against Vimy ridge to support the "Mars" attack.

<sup>3</sup> "George 2" was divided into three parts: "Coursing (*Hasenjagd*)" against Messines ridge; "Woodfeast (*Waldfest*)", from the north side of the Ypres Salient, in order to cut off the troops in it; "Flanders 3", from Dixmude, as a diversion.

continued, so that they would be ready at the beginning of April. Other attacks to be prepared included "Archangel" by the *Seventh Army* (on the left of the *Eighteenth*) south of the Oise, to gain possession of the high ground east of the Oise—Aisne canal, and thus attract enemy reserves. The preparations for "Hector" and "Achilles", east of Reims, were "to be kept fluid", and a new attack, "Roland", organized east of them, on the old Champagne battlefield. "Castor" and "Pollux", on either side of Verdun, were entirely abandoned. In the Duke Albrecht of Württemberg's Group, diversions, "Strassburg", from the Breusch valley, and "Belfort" in the Sundgau, were to be organized. In addition, dummy preparations were to be made and demonstrations carried out.

Thus, as Ludendorff repeated at a conference at Mons on the 3rd February, "Michael" was to be the main attack, supplemented on the flanks by "Archangel" and "Mars"; should these attacks be brought to a stop, "Roland" and "George" could be set in motion as soon as the heavy artillery, trench mortars and aeroplanes used to prepare the break-through—which it will be convenient to call Ludendorff's "Battering Train"—could be shifted.

A change had meantime taken place to the German advantage: the extension southward of the British right had been carried out. As early as the 16th January, General von Sauberzweig, the Chief of the Staff of the *Eighteenth Army*, had written to Lieut.-Colonel Wetzell:—<sup>1</sup>

It may now be accepted that the British have taken over the front of the French III. Corps. They will no doubt take over that of the XXXVII. Corps up to the Oise, so that in future the Oise will be the boundary between the French and British. [Very nearly correct.]

The *Eighteenth Army* will therefore have only British opposite to it. This will make the situation more favourable for us.

The offensive is principally intended to strike the British. They now stand opposite to us on the whole front of the Group of Armies which is to make the offensive.<sup>2</sup> It need not be anticipated that the French will run themselves off their legs

<sup>1</sup> Fehr, pp. 25-6. The letter was attached to the official plan of attack of the *Eighteenth Army* sent to O.H.L. for approval. In it the task of this Army was thus enunciated:—

"The *Eighteenth Army* is to throw the enemy opposite it over the "Somme—Ham—Péronne sector, and over the Crozat canal, and protect "the left flank of the *Second Army*, which is attacking in the direction of "Péronne and northwards".

<sup>2</sup> The *Eighteenth Army* at this date had not been transferred to the German Crown Prince.

and hurry at once to the help of their Entente comrades. They will first wait and see if their own front is not attacked also, and decide to support their Ally only when the situation has been quite cleared up. That will not be immediately, as demonstrations to deceive the French [only too successful] will be made by the German Crown Prince's Group.

In view of the position of the British reserves, "mainly "around Péronne", he foresaw that the *Eighteenth Army* would have an easy task, and reach the Crozat canal—Somme line "in two or three days". He added, "this line "will not be passed. All reserves will be turned north—"westward, and sent to the attack in this direction, left "flank on Péronne". That is, the Somme once reached, all possible assistance was to be given to the *Second Army*.

There is no record of any conversation or correspondence on the subject of the *Eighteenth Army* plan in the next six weeks, but evidently some change was discussed. It has been suggested that as the Army plans were being worked out in detail, it became evident that large forces would be immobilized in a very short time on the Crozat canal and the Somme unless the *Eighteenth*, the southernmost of the three attacking Armies, were allowed to advance beyond the river and the canal, which obviously was the better tactical course, as we had learnt in regard to the Aisne in 1914. On the 28th February, the O.H.L. liaison officer with the German Crown Prince's Group reported that the *Eighteenth Army* was asking for a division of the *Seventh Army* to be so placed that it might, if ordered, move forward via La Fère, apparently in order to support the left wing of the *Eighteenth Army* advancing west of the Oise. On the 3rd March, Ludendorff—the draft telegram is in his handwriting—replied to this proposal : "Agreed. It is "most desirable for the rapid and favourable course of the "Michael attack that the left wing of the *Eighteenth Army* "should press forward well beyond the canal. For this "purpose as many divisions as possible of the *Seventh Army* "should be held ready to be brought forward via La Fère". He added that the details would be settled at a conference at Mons on the 7th.

Once the idea of permitting the *Eighteenth Army* to cross the Crozat canal was formulated, the German Crown Prince very naturally tried to increase the importance of the rôle of his Group. He replied on the 6th March that a thrust via La Fère would do little good if "Michael 3" remained an attack with a limited objective (the Crozat

canal—Somme) : if the attack of the *Eighteenth Army* was carried over the Somme, it might lead to great results : should the French come to the assistance of the British and make a counter-attack over the line Noyon—Roye, or take up a position to receive the defeated British on the Crozat canal—Somme line, an attack from the La Fère area would be very effective : it was therefore desirable to retain the possibility of making this attack, and to secure bridgeheads west of the Crozat canal at Tergnier and Jussy as quickly as possible.

The question was settled by the issue on the 10th March of the operation order for the offensive :

His Majesty commands

1. The Michael Attack will take place on the 21st March. Break into the first hostile position at 9.40 A.M.
2. The first great tactical object of Crown Prince Rupprecht's Group of Armies will be to cut off the British in the Cambrai Salient and gain, north of the junction of the Omignon stream with the Somme, the line Croisilles—Bapaume—Péronne—mouth of the Omignon. Should the progress of the attack of the right wing (*Seventeenth Army*) be very good, it will be carried further, beyond Croisilles. The subsequent task of this Group of Armies will be to push forward in the direction Arras—Albert, to hold the Somme near Péronne securely with the left wing, and with the main weight of the attack on the right wing to upset the balance of the British front on the *Sixth Army* front [north of the *Seventeenth*] as well as on the front of attack, and thus free further German forces from position warfare for the advance. All divisions stationed behind the *Fourth* and *Sixth Army* fronts will be brought forward at once in view of this contingency.
3. The German Crown Prince's Group of Armies will first gain the line of the Somme south of the Omignon stream, and the Crozat canal. The *Eighteenth Army* will seize the passages over the Somme and the canal by a rapid forward movement. The *Eighteenth Army* will also be prepared to extend its right wing as far as Péronne. This Group of Armies will study the question of reinforcing the left wing of the *Eighteenth Army* by divisions from the *Seventh*, *First* and *Third Armies*.
4. The *2nd Guard Division*, *26th Württemberg Division* and *12th Division* remain at the disposal of O.H.L.
5. As regards the attacks Mars and Archangel, decision is reserved, as it must depend upon the progress of the operations. Preparations for them are to be pushed forward without interruption.

6. The remaining Armies will act in accordance with Secret Operation Order of the 4th March.<sup>1</sup> Rupprecht's Group of Armies will protect the right flank of the Mars—Michael operations against a British counter-attack. The German Crown Prince's Group will withdraw in the face of a French attack in grand style against the *Seventh* (exclusive of the Archangel front), *First* and *Third Armies*. In Gallwitz's and Duke Albrecht's Groups of Armies, decision is reserved as regards the strategic measures to be taken in the event of a French attack in grand style, and as regards the further withdrawal of divisions for the main battle.

VON HINDENBURG.

It is clear from this order that Ludendorff had so far departed from the original scheme that the *Eighteenth Army* instead of halting on the Crozat canal—Somme line, was to seize the passages, and that the left wing of that Army, reinforced from the Armies on its left, might possibly be required to push on further in order to counter-attack any French force which might appear to reinforce the British right.

The instruction that Hutier should be prepared to extend his right wing to Péronne, which would relieve pressure on the left wing of Rupprecht's Group confirms the impression, however, that the fundamental idea of the original scheme was maintained. For it was the Armies advancing north of Péronne which were charged with the main object of the offensive, the overthrow of the British north of the Somme. The French nevertheless had to be kept away from the decisive area of operations, and to achieve this end an offensive by the *Eighteenth Army*, reinforced on the left, might, in certain circumstances, become necessary.

The operation order issued by the Crown Prince's Group on the 14th showed that he thoroughly comprehended the part which Hutier's Army was to play. It began, "The "British Army will be attacked", and continued :—

The *Eighteenth Army*, making its right wing strong, will break through the enemy's position between the Omignon stream and the Oise, push forward to the Somme and the Crozat canal, and, with a view to further advance, seize the main crossings between St. Christ and Tergnier (both inclusive). Strong reserves will be brought up close in rear of the right wing of the Army. Their task will be to carry forward the attack of the *Eighteenth Army*, and—during any further progress of that

<sup>1</sup> This order gave instructions for feints, and is dealt with later.

Army—to attack, in flank and rear [that is, north-westwards] the enemy still opposing the *Second Army* in the general direction Tertry [8 miles south-east of Péronne]—Péronne. . . . The Army will be prepared, after the attack has succeeded, to extend its right wing as far as Péronne (exclusive).

Another paragraph added that “the mission of the “*Seventh, First and Third Armies* will be to secure the left “flank of the German attack; they will retire before enemy “attacks into the prepared Battle Zone”. These Armies were to have reserves of all arms ready to move at the shortest notice.

General von Hutier was somewhat brief in the opening paragraphs of his operation orders, also issued on the 14th. They ran :—

The Army will attack on both sides of St. Quentin in order to throw back the enemy over the Somme and the Crozat canal. The attack is to be carried on continuously without halt. There will be no daily objectives.

On the 15th, however, he issued lengthy instructions to his corps commanders for the continuance of the operations beyond the Somme and the Crozat canal, as follows :—

1. If the enemy is driven back over the Somme and the Crozat canal, he will in any case try to hold on to this line, if only to safeguard the bringing of reinforcements against the *Second* and *Seventeenth Armies* via Roye and Amiens. It is therefore necessary to force the line quickly. Loss of time on our part will permit the enemy to strengthen his defences. . . .
2. As soon as the Somme and the Crozat canal have been crossed, the task of the *Eighteenth Army* will be to attract to itself the French reserves earmarked for the support of the British, defeat them, and sever the connection between the French and British. It may be assumed that the French will bring up strong reserves by the railways Roye—Chaulnes and Montdidier—Amiens in order to launch them below Péronne against the flank of the *Second Army* and the front of the *Eighteenth*.

Even in the event of a great offensive against their own front they will not desist from giving local support to the British. In addition, other forces will probably be sent via Chauny—Noyon, and by the railway Compiègne—Noyon, and pushed forward to the Crozat canal and the Somme, for the protection of their flank. This movement will begin as soon as our activities on the fronts not to be attacked are recognized as feints. This, at latest, should be on the second day of the attack.

The task of the *Eighteenth Army* therefore demands resolute,

rapid action, both in forcing the line of the Somme and the Crozat canal, and in the further advance. The sooner the Army reaches the line Chaulnes—Roye, the more chance is there of its encountering the French whilst they are still un-deployed and the more favourable will the prospects of open warfare become.

The instructions went on to allot six divisions to protect the left flank of the Army, for on the security of this flank depended the uninterrupted advance. Nineteen divisions would remain for the advance, provided that none were used to support the *Second Army* east of the Somme.

In forwarding these instructions to O.H.L. for approval, the German Crown Prince's Group made the following remarks :—

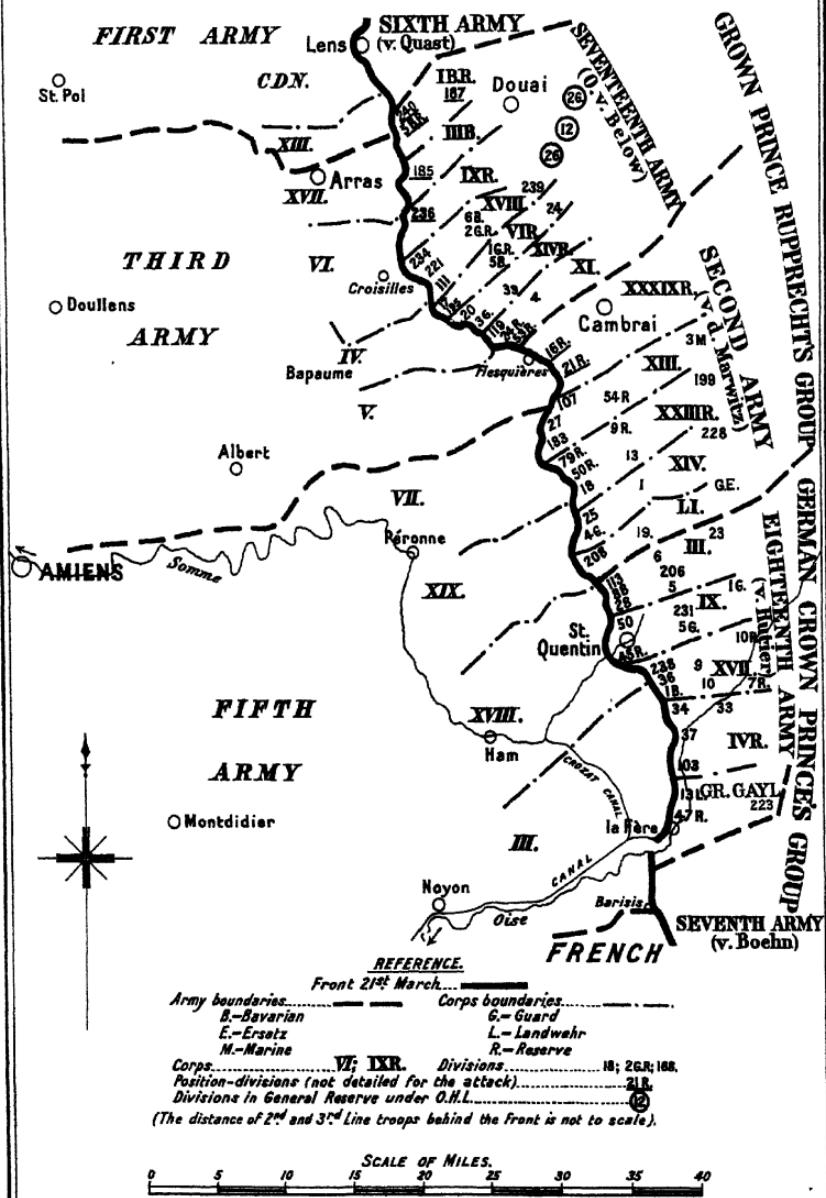
The more the French counter-measures are directed against Rupprecht's Group the greater effect will the proposed operation have on the French. The enemy will quickly realize its decisive importance and the threat to his capital. We must expect the strongest reaction, and large forces must therefore be employed on the operation. . . . Only O.H.L. can decide during the course of events whether the operation shall be executed. Preparations have been made for it, in so far as an order has been given by the Group to the *Eighteenth Army* to seize the main crossings between St. Christ and Tergnier for further advance.

Crown Prince Rupprecht's operation orders, issued on the 16th March, make it perfectly clear that the intention was still for the *Second* and *Seventeenth Armies* to roll up the British line north of the Somme, whilst, if events permitted, the *Eighteenth Army* was to assist. They contained the following :—

1. Michael Armies [*Seventeenth* and *Second*]. The first object of Michael 1 and 2 is to cut off the British in the Cambrai Salient and obtain a great tactical success. To achieve this a relentless advance, as far as possible without a pause, is necessary, with strong inner flanks, on Ytres [7 miles south-east of Bapaume] (*Seventeenth*) and Equancourt (*Second*). The *Seventeenth* and *Second Armies* will first gain the line Croisilles—Bapaume—Péronne—mouth of Omignon. . . . The next task of the *Seventeenth* and *Second Armies* is to push forward to the line Arras—Albert and upset the balance of the British Army, including the troops in front of the *Sixth Army*. To accomplish this, the *Seventeenth Army* will continue the attack in a general north-westerly direction, rolling up the adjacent British front, and the *Second Army* will do so in a westerly direction, secured by



**DISTRIBUTION OF GERMAN FORCES  
ON THE FRONT OF ATTACK  
21<sup>st</sup> March 1918.**



*Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch).*

the Somme. . . . As a general point of direction for the inner flanks of the two Armies, Miraumont [5 miles west of Bapaume] may be temporarily adopted. I specially insist that the centre of gravity of the attack of the *Seventeenth Army* will lie east of Bapaume—Ytres. Only when a great tactical success has been won in co-operation with the *Second Army* will it be possible to develop the attack in the direction of Arras. O.H.L. has reserved its decision as regards Mars. The Mars divisions must be so placed that they will be available for an immediate exploitation of the Michael attack by rolling up the front north of Fontaine lez Croisilles. Preparations for extending the attack still further northwards are to be made by arranging for the rapid regrouping of the artillery.

2. The German Crown Prince's Group has the task of reaching the Somme and the Crozat canal south of the Omignon (Michael 3). Next, the *Eighteenth Army* has to be ready to extend its right flank as far as Péronne. In the case that the *Second Army* meets with strong resistance and, on the other hand, the *Eighteenth Army* manages to get forward more rapidly, the latter is to launch strong forces via Beauvois—Terry [that is north-westwards] in the direction of Péronne, in order to cut off, in combination with the left wing of the *Seventeenth Army*, the enemy opposing the *Second Army*. In such a situation, the *Seventeenth Army* will have to continue its attack past Ytres southward, looking out for the protection of its right flank.

Thus, the troops on each side of the Flesquières Salient and the opposition in front of the *Second Army* were to be smashed up.

Other paragraphs dealt with the action to be pursued by the northern wing of the *Seventeenth*, the *Sixth* and the *Fourth Armies* should "Michael" prove successful.

The *Seventeenth Army* had the most difficult and the most important task; for with its success or failure stood or fell the "Michael" plan. Yet insufficient attention seems to have been paid to its difficulties and requirements. Both on tactical and strategical grounds General Otto von Below wished to extend the northern flank of his attack as far as the Scarpe. Before his arrival both O.H.L. and Rupprecht's Group had pronounced the attack on Arras, "Mars", too difficult; more troops could not be provided except by shortening the front of the *Eighteenth Army*, and this could not be done as its left was tied to the Oise. They compromised by agreeing to extend the attack northwards, but not until penetration had been effected by "Michael 1", and then only with such forces as had been released by the success of "Michael". The *Seventeenth Army*

proposed to guard its right flank by capturing the Monchy le Preux spur and keeping the O.H.L. reserve (only three divisions) behind this flank. O.H.L. objected to this proposal, as savouring too much of strategy : it regarded as far more important a tactical victory on the left of the *Seventeenth Army* in the direction of Bapaume, in co-operation with the *Second Army*. Arras contained a direct tactical threat to the pivot of the whole "Michael" operation ; yet it was not until the 19th March that O.H.L. consented to the three divisions of the General Reserve being brought forward to the Douai area ; and even then made their employment dependent on the general success of "Michael".

The advance westwards and wheel north-westwards of the *Second Army*, supported as it was on both flanks, was comparatively easy ; but the wheel of the *Seventeenth Army*, actually round Arras and the difficult ground near that place, could obviously not be carried out with a reasonable degree of safety until the British had been driven from Arras, its pivot.

A total of 63 divisions were collected for the assault, giving, with the 11 position divisions, in the line, a total of 74. Of these, three, as already mentioned, were the O.H.L. reserve behind the right of the *Seventeenth Army* ; the others were distributed as follows :—<sup>1</sup>

	Divisions				Total
	Position	1st Line	2nd Line	3rd Line	
<i>Eighteenth Army</i> .	1	12	8	4	25
<i>Second Army</i> .	3 <sup>2</sup>	10	4	4	21
<i>Seventeenth Army</i> .	7 <sup>3</sup>	10	6	2	25
	11	32	18	10	71

**Sketch** Looking at the map, it will be seen, that, omitting such 12. position divisions as were not to assault, some 43 divisions of the *Eighteenth* and *Second Armies* were massed opposite the 14 divisions (2 G.H.Q.) of General Gough's Fifth Army, and 19 divisions of the *Seventeenth Army* against the centre (6 front line divisions) of General Byng's Third Army (16 divisions, of which 6—2 G.H.Q.—were in reserve);

<sup>1</sup> These figures were kindly furnished by the *Reichsarchiv*.

<sup>2</sup> Two divisions opposite apex of Flesquieres Salient.

<sup>3</sup> Six opposite Arras (4 in front line, 2 in second line).

8 position divisions being opposite its outer wings (4 divisions).

With these forces were :—

950 field batteries,  
701 heavy batteries ;  
55 super-heavy batteries ;<sup>1</sup>  
3532 trench mortars<sup>2</sup>  
88 flights of protection-duty aeroplanes ;  
39 pursuit flights ;  
5 bombing squadrons.<sup>3</sup>

. The concentration of these vast forces and their subsidiary services on the battle area constituted a gigantic problem which was solved with complete success. All dumping of ammunition was completed by the 15th March ; the extra guns and trench mortars were brought up between the 11th and 19th March, and all were in position on the 20th. The 60 fresh divisions for the offensive began moving up on the 16th ; on the night of the 18th/19th they rested ; and on that of the 19th/20th they moved to their assault positions, so that they had the night of the 20th/21st for getting ready.

It was recognized as unlikely that the preparations for the assault by such a mass of men with such a mass of material could be completely concealed from the British. Yet success largely depended on surprise. The ideal procedure would have been to attack on the whole long Western Front. This, however, was out of the question, so the preparation of a number of attacks which were not meant to be delivered on the 21st March was carried out, as we have seen. Orders were given that each German Army should be

<sup>1</sup> The distribution by guns and howitzers, kindly furnished by the *Reichsarchiv*, was :

Army	Field	Heavy	Super-heavy	Total
<i>Eighteenth</i> . . . . .	1,478	940	80	2,448
<i>Second</i> . . . . .	1,075	696	18	1,789
<i>Seventeenth</i> . . . . .	1,412	799	25	2,236
	3,965	2,435	73	6,473

out of a total on the Western Front of 8,910 field guns and howitzers, and 4,922 heavy and super-heavy.

<sup>2</sup> *Eighteenth Army*, 1,226, *Second*, 1,080 and *Seventeenth*, 1,226, out of 8,845 on the Western Front.

<sup>3</sup> Kuhl, p. 122. The "Flieger Nachrichtenblatt", Sept.-Dec. 1926, gives a higher number of flights: observation, 49, battle, 27, pursuit, 35, bombing, 12, out of a total on the Western Front of 153, 30, 81 and 27.

made to believe that the operation which it was preparing would be the main attack. False reports were spread. Steps were taken to deceive the French population in the occupied areas behind the front by notifications of billeting requirements, the announcement of deportations from certain areas, and other devices. Special "Safety Officers" were appointed to watch over and control all measures of security including censorship of letters, use of the telephone and conversations in public places, and observers were told off to watch that the preparations were sufficiently concealed from the air. On the 18th February O.H.L. laid down the general lines on which the measures for mystifying and misleading the enemy were to be developed, the main idea being that the French should be induced to believe that they would be attacked whilst on the British front the Germans would stand on the defensive. Going into detail, the rumours and preparations should be designed to indicate that the main attack would be made about the middle of March from the front of the *First* and *Third Armies* in Champagne (between Varennes and Reims), and by the *Fifth Army* against the north front of Verdun, with subsidiary attacks from the southern front of the *Seventh Army* on the Aisne, and by the Duke Albrecht's Group in Eastern Lorraine and in Alsace. On the British front, the *Sixth* and *Fourth Armies* (nearest the sea) were to make demonstrations of increased activity. For these enterprises, the various Armies were to use the normal means at their disposal; no additional ammunition was provided, except for the bombardment of Verdun. The feints and demonstrations were to reach their maximum activity about the middle of March, but were to be continued after that date as might be desirable.<sup>1</sup>

The Groups of Armies made various supplementary proposals, which were all approved. Thus Duke Albrecht inserted an extra Army headquarters, No. 19, in Lorraine; the German Crown Prince arranged to make the Champagne preparations evident from the 1st March, and carry out preparatory attacks, which would reach their maximum on

<sup>1</sup> Possibly the most effective trick played by the Germans to deceive General Pétain was the loosing of a captive balloon with notes on the great attack to be delivered against the French among the papers in the car. The following is the account in F.O.A. vi. (i), pp. 250-1:—

"According to the information of prisoners and particularly that found "in a German captive balloon which fell in our lines on 20th March, it "seemed certain that the enemy intended to attack by surprise on 26th "March between Reims and 'les Monts' [Argonne] much as he did against "our Allies on the 21st".

the 20th March; Crown Prince Rupprecht ordered that up to the 5th March the activity on his front should be about the same everywhere, but from that date the preparations for "George" should be made more prominent than those for "Michael"; three days before the great attack, demonstrations would be begun on the "George" front.

Finally, on the 4th March, Ludendorff issued an order that on the "George" and "Archangel" fronts a lively artillery bombardment should be carried on during the artillery preparation on the front of attack; that the German Crown Prince should continue his false attacks on the *Seventh, First and Third Army* fronts opposite the French until the 24th March, with increased artillery fire; that Gallwitz should stop the attack on Verdun on the 22nd, and from the evening of that day hold the heavy artillery ready for transport elsewhere by railway; and that Duke Albrecht should collect every available heavy gun which he could move and place them on the Lorraine front for a bombardment from the 20th to the 24th March. In addition, a general bombardment of villages and important traffic junctions on the whole of the Western Front was ordered.

On the actual front of attack infinite precautions were taken to conceal the immense accumulation of troops. All important movements were made by night; the attacking divisions were kept well back, and only brought up at the latest moment; no accumulation of troops or material was permitted near railway stations, men being at once marched away. The deployment of the artillery was divided into three time-classes: batteries whose emplacements were well concealed were brought up first; next those whose emplacements did not permit of good concealment, but which had adjacent cover where the guns could be hidden until the last moment; and thirdly the batteries which had no concealment. The concentration of the air force was very carefully thought out: additional hangars were put up and wireless stations and aerodromes installed along the whole front, but the machines themselves were kept well back or in the areas adjoining the front of attack; pilots were brought up in parties for short periods to learn the front, and no extra activity was shown. Additional means of communication were organized everywhere, and extra wireless stations and power buzzers were installed on the fronts where attacks were to be feigned. One German account laments that all these elaborate tactical precautions

were rendered vain by the desertion to the British of some men of a trench mortar battery ; but the general strategic measures undoubtedly deceived French G.Q.G.

Not only the troops, but the divisional generals and staffs were given special courses of training ; and from headquarters of all degrees there was a flood of official literature on offensive warfare.<sup>1</sup> Its contents would fill many volumes, here there is room only to quote a few of the more significant phrases :—

The success of a break-through is not only a question of tactics and strategy, it is essentially one of reinforcement and supply.

The tactical break-through is not an objective in itself ; its *raison d'être* is to give the opportunity to apply the strongest form of attack, envelopment.

The objective of the first day must be at least the enemy's artillery ; the objective of the second day depends on what is achieved on the first ; there must be no rigid adherence to plans made beforehand.

As regards touch, infantry which looks to the right or the left soon comes to a stop. Touch with the enemy is the desideratum ; a uniform advance in line must in no case be demanded. The fastest, not the slowest, must set the pace, and no time must be given to the enemy to surround any troops who have forced their way into the position ahead of their fellows.

The advance of the infantry must be organized in most complete combination with that of the artillery. The infantry must be warned against too great dependence on the creeping barrage, to which it is too much inclined. This barrage must be worked out on a fixed programme, but changes made as necessary by means of light signals.

There must be no thought of relieving the divisions in first line every day, or of assigning them a day-objective. With good leading, they should go ahead for several days.

The final general directions of the Supreme Command included the following :—

During training in the past objectives have too often been indicated as first line, second line, intermediate line, and

<sup>1</sup> The literature has been summed up in a series of pamphlets, entitled "Die Vorbereitung des deutschen Heeres für die Grosse Schlacht in "Frankreich im Frühjahr 1918". The various numbers deal with general principles, infantry, artillery, air force, trench mortars, signal communications, etc.

There was also during the winter of 1917–18 intensive patriotic instruction of the men, "Vaterländischer Unterricht", carried out by special officers.

artillery protection line ; the aim of the break-through should be the enemy's artillery, when the lines will fall of themselves.

The reserves must be put in where the attack is progressing, not where it is held up.

Continual scouting and patrolling must be kept up ahead and on the flanks. Rifle and machine-gun fire at medium and long ranges is too often neglected.

The temporary effects of gas are far greater than those of H.E. shell ; the less artillery support there is the more will smoke help.

The infantry must first see what it can do for itself, and must not call for artillery support directly it is held up.

The special instructions to the infantry varied in the different Armies, corps and even divisions, according to local circumstances and experience ; but one general principle was common to all, that the assault was to be led by "Storm Troops" constantly kept up to strength by reinforcement, who were to make headway wherever resistance was weakening. They were to be followed by thin skirmish lines and "battle units", small composite forces to be used as battalion and regimental reserves, composed of infantry, machine guns, trench mortars, engineers, sections of field artillery, and ammunition carriers. The Storm Troops were sometimes whole special battalions, sometimes only parties selected from a battalion ; armed with light machine guns, light trench mortars and flame projectors, their duty was to press on over weakly held trenches, past centres of resistance and machine-gun nests, which they left to the waves following them.<sup>1</sup> The general instruction was : "push on, keep inside the divisional areas, do not trouble about what happens right or "left". If tanks appeared they were to be allowed to pass through, to be dealt with by the artillery in rear ; but the infantry accompanying them was to be engaged. Counter-attacks were to be stopped by fire and then dealt with by the bayonet. Machine guns were never to retire. Finally, the German commanders, remembering their own conduct in February 1917, warned the infantry against "booby traps" and "poisoned food and drink which the "enemy might leave behind".

As regards aircraft, besides the usual flights for reconnaissance, photography, artillery ranging, and bombing, each Army had a group of four low-flying flights ; each

<sup>1</sup> This is what is now known as "infiltration", but no particular word was used to describe it in the German instructions.

corps, six ; and each division, one. These flights were always to cross the enemy front obliquely and then dive down and attack infantry, artillery, reserves and transport columns with machine-gun fire and light bombs.

The artillery bombardment was to be of short duration—five hours only—as the best possible means of surprise. It was considered that by concentrating an unprecedented number of guns, supplemented by trench mortars, the requisite effect could be produced in that time.<sup>1</sup> The first two hours of the bombardment were to be devoted chiefly to gassing the British artillery.<sup>2</sup> During the remaining three hours, the weight of the fire was to be directed against the infantry and its defences, culminating in concentration on the front trenches. At the moment of assault, the artillery fire was to lift and move forward as a creeping barrage. All guns were to be placed as far forward as possible, so that the barrage might be continued until a considerable advance had been made, after which the infantry would have to trust, if it still encountered resist-

<sup>1</sup> The supply of ammunition was arranged on the following scale :—

For the bombardment of the defences :

	Per battery
Field howitzer . . . . .	800 rounds
5·9-inch how. 1913 pati. . . . .	600 "
do. 1902 " . . . . .	400 "
do. 1896 " . . . . .	300 "
Super-heavy howitzers . . . . .	325 "

For the counter-batteries, H.E. supply only :

	Per battery
Field howitzer . . . . .	1,000 rounds
5·9-inch howitzer . . . . .	500 "
Super-heavy howitzer . . . . .	200 "

After the bombardment, the daily supply to be sent up was :

	Per battery
Field gun . . . . .	1,500 rounds
Field howitzer . . . . .	1,200 "
5·9-inch howitzer . . . . .	1,000 "
4-inch gun . . . . .	1,000 "

This quantity could be supplied 40 miles from railhead.

<sup>2</sup> " Mixed shelling " in the proportion of  $4\frac{1}{2}$  gas shell to 1 of high explosive was used against the artillery. Against other targets 1 : 1 was used. The gas was also mixed, part being lethal and part lacrymatory, the latter forcing the opponents to take off their gas masks and thus expose themselves. Mustard gas was not employed in the bombardment, but it was used earlier for shelling areas to prevent use being made of them or defences constructed in them ; if the German infantry would have to cross these areas, the gas shelling was discontinued at least three days before the attack. It was forbidden to use gas in a barrage ; nevertheless lacrymatory gas was so employed, but always at least 600 metres ahead of the infantry.

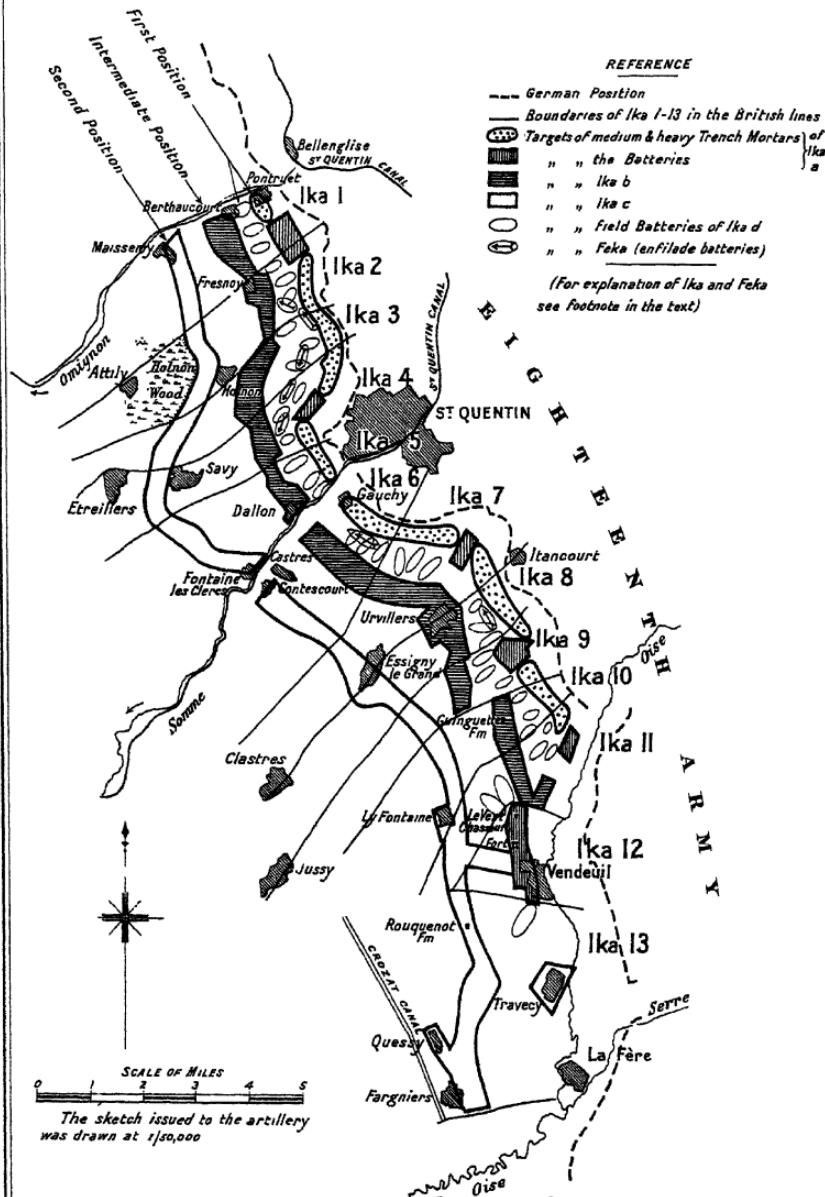


Sketch 18.

21<sup>ST</sup> MARCH.

Bombardment of the British Defences  
by Eighteenth Army Artillery.

(From Sketch 37 in *Die Artillerie beim Angriff im Stellungskrieg*  
by Colonel Bruchmüller).



Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch)

ance, to the field guns (a battery per regiment) and light trench mortars, which were to accompany it. Minute instructions were issued on training the troops to drag the guns and trench mortars forward, engineer and infantry parties being attached for the purpose.

Registration was limited. In the *Eighteenth Army*, opposite General Gough, there was no registration, except a few shots for range ; but its absence is not now regarded by German critics as being of special importance in contributing to surprise, as it was obvious that the British knew that an attack was impending, and ranging was being done along the rest of the front. The artillery adviser of the *Eighteenth Army*, Lieut.-Colonel Bruchmüller, a retired officer recalled to the service, was regarded as one of the foremost German artillery experts, so a summary of his time programme, will give some idea of the bombardment to which the Fifth Army was exposed.<sup>1</sup>

*4.40 a.m. First period, 120 minutes.* General surprise fire on the enemy batteries, trench mortars, command posts, telephone exchanges, billets and bivouacs, beginning with a crash, and fired by all batteries and trench mortars (mixed gas and H.E. shell). After 20 minutes the trench mortars stop. At 5.30 A.M. ten minutes surprise fire on the infantry positions, beginning suddenly from all batteries except super-heavy (against the First and Intermediate Positions, H.E. only, against the Second Position, mixed gas, lethal and lacrymatory). During this ten minutes no counter-battery work.

*6.40 a.m. Second, Third and Fourth Periods,* each of ten minutes, during each of which a proportion of the batteries of the infantry groups check the range on named trench lines, whilst the rest fire on other defences.

*7.10 a.m. Fifth Period, 70 minutes.* Whilst counter-batteries (*Aka*) and long-range batteries (*Feka*) continue to fire on their normal targets, the others (*Ika*) bombard the infantry defences for effect, the areas being defined by a map. After 30 minutes' fire, some howitzers in each group (*Ika a*) sweep the ground

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch 18 and refer to Bruchmüller's "Die Artillerie beim Angriff im Stellungskrieg", which is well provided with maps showing allotment of targets. The artillery of the *Eighteenth Army* was divided between four corps fronts, and each corps command was further divided into groups of long distance and flanking batteries (*Feka*), counter-batteries (*Aka*), and two or three groups of batteries for engaging infantry defences (*Ika*) ; these last were each sub-divided into 4 sub-groups, "a", "b", "c", and "d" : "a" being usually howitzers ; "b" howitzers and super-heavy howitzers ; "c" and "d" field guns. Thus a rapid order could be issued to all or half the field guns, by calling "*Ika c and d*" or "*Ika c*".

between the trenches of the First Position for 15 minutes ; the other howitzers (*Ika b*) shell certain centres of resistance for 10 minutes, and then sweep backwards ; the field guns (*Ika c*) sweep the ground between the Second and Intermediate Positions for 10 minutes with lacrymatory and H.E. shell.

*8.20 a.m. Sixth Period, 75 minutes.* Shooting as in the Fifth Period, with slight variation of targets for the long-range batteries : the same special bombardments after 30 minutes' fire, also with slight variation of targets.

*9.35 a.m. Seventh Period.* The 5 minutes before Zero. All howitzers fire as near to the front line of the First Position as is possible without endangering their own infantry ; beyond them the light and medium trench mortars fire, and beyond them again the field guns, but only with H.E. ; beyond them again the super-heavy guns, flanking batteries and heavy trench mortars fire on the second line of the First Position ; long-range guns (other than flanking batteries) and some of the guns not to be used in the creeping barrage fire on the Second Position ; the others continue counter-battery work. At the end of this period, the infantry will assault without " hurrahs ".

The barrage [fired in principal by the field artillery, 5·9-inch howitzers and light trench mortars], proceeds by deep bounds, the first bound being 300 metres, other bounds 200 metres for field artillery, and 400 for the heavy artillery ; after the first bound the field artillery to halt the barrage for 3 minutes, the heavy for 2 ; after the other bounds for 4 and 8 minutes, respectively. Signals for advancing the barrage on emergency, 200 metres at a time, to be by use of green rockets and the small flame projectors ; no signals for halting it.

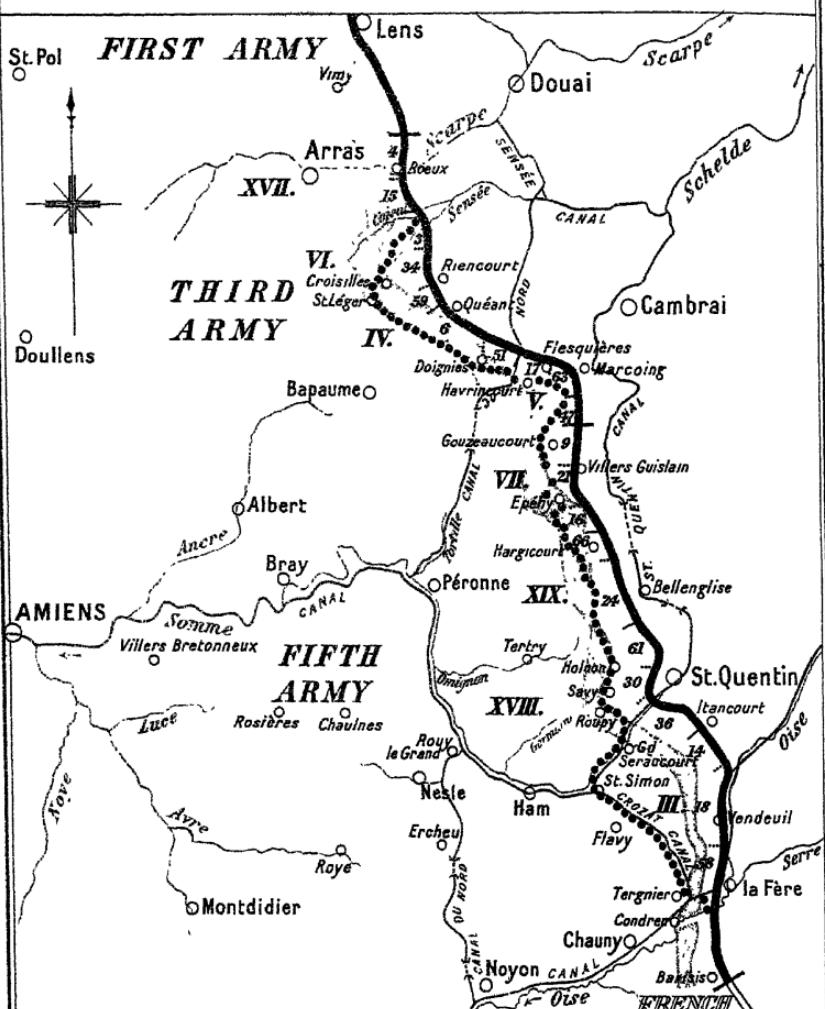
Finally the infantry was warned that the bombardment would do no more than compel the enemy to take cover and thus give opportunity for surprising him. It would hamper the enemy, but not annihilate him. Its effect therefore had value only if the infantry accepted the opportunity " by keeping close behind the barrage regard- " less of shell splinters. A single enemy machine gun " which survives the bombardment does more harm than " any number of our own shell splinters ".

How this well-planned hurricane of shell burst on the Fifth and Third Armies, and how in spite of it there remained both guns and infantry in action to meet the on-rushing Germans will be told in the next chapter.



Sketch 14.

## 21ST MARCH.



### REFERENCE.

Line 21 <sup>st</sup> March.....	—	22 <sup>nd</sup> March a.m.....	.....
Army boundaries.....	—	Corps boundaries.....	.....
Divisional .....	—	battle zone .....	.....

Miles 10

SCALE

0 10 20 Miles.

Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch)

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE<sup>1</sup>

21ST MARCH 1918

(Maps 2, 3 ; Sketch 14)

THE ground mist which had begun to rise about 5 P.M. on Maps 2, the evening of the 20th March over the whole area occupied<sup>3</sup>. Sketch by the British Fifth and Third Armies developed steadily,<sup>14</sup> until by 9 P.M. it was reported as "ground fog". It continued to thicken during the night, when patrols at first found No Man's Land empty, but discovered many gaps in the German wire, and encountered strong resistance in that vicinity. Owing to the unpropitious weather, only a few raids were made; these proved generally unsuccessful. Such prisoners as were taken represented many different units, while their obvious anxiety to be sent to the rear seemed to confirm their statements that an attack would begin in a few hours.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, some divisions set about manning their battle stations forthwith; the artillery from 3.30 A.M. onwards began to fire intermittent bursts on localities where it was thought the enemy might be assembling; while, in consequence of information obtained in a raid by the 61st Division, the St. Quentin front was flooded with gas from cylinders previously placed in position.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> No synopses are provided at the head of the chapters which deal with the fighting day by day; what happened can be seen on the Sketches. The official name given to the operations is "The Offensive in Picardy" (21st March-5th April 1918), The First Battles of the Somme 1918"; with the following battle names : 21st-23rd March, Battle of St. Quentin ; 24th/25th, Battle of Bapaume ; 26th/27th, Battle of Rosières ; 28th, First Battle of Arras, 1918 ; 4th April, Battle of the Avre ; 5th April, Battle of the Ancre.

<sup>2</sup> One prisoner definitely told an officer who spoke to him in German that the assault would take place at 9.30 A.M.

<sup>3</sup> "Foot Guard Regt. No. 3" (which was in the 5th Guard Division in second line) mentions twice that the smell of gas was very perceptible in St. Quentin, and that the gas curdled in combination with the fog.

About 4.40 A.M.—reports vary by a few minutes as to the exact time—a terrific bombardment opened with a crash on the whole front of the Fifth Army; on three-quarters of the front of the Third Army (V., IV. and VI. Corps); and on the front of the First Army between Fleurbaix (just north of the La Bassée canal) and Armentières, subsequently being slightly extended. After a couple of hours, the fire slackened on the First Army sector, also on the small portion of the Fifth Army front south of and just north of the Oise. The bombardment, which included much gas (lacrymatory) shell, at first appeared to be directed chiefly on artillery positions, and on machine-gun posts in the Battle Zone, as well as on special localities behind this zone.<sup>1</sup> On the forward areas the shelling as a whole was insignificant until a later stage; but trench mortars, heavy and light, which had been pushed well forward, battered the front trenches for a time.

It was evident from the outset that the enemy had marked down his targets with considerable accuracy: divisional headquarters, telephone exchanges, railway stations and other important centres all received hits; and within a short time the cables laid to the Forward Zone, in order to link up divisional and brigade headquarters, were nearly all cut although they had been deeply buried.<sup>2</sup> Wireless and power-buzzer installations were smashed,<sup>3</sup> some defended areas, redoubts and posts rendered untenable, and all the battery positions which had been in use were deluged with gas, which, in combination with the fog, produced a heavy nauseating mixture. So heavy was the fire that the very air seemed to vibrate with shell bursts. Fortunately the wind proved not altogether favourable for the use of gas by the enemy, and, in anticipation of the bombardment, many guns had been shifted to their alternative positions; yet even some of these suffered.

The reply of the British artillery to the bombardment was immediate: the batteries fired on their night “counter-“preparation” lines as best they could; for, although unable

<sup>1</sup> Against the Flesquières Salient, mustard gas was employed, a sure sign, as the Director of Gas Services pointed out, that no attack was intended against it.

<sup>2</sup> It was subsequently ascertained that the enemy had photographed the new cable trenches from the air and fired at the junctions. Near these and other vital places the German shells fell in parallel lines, five yards apart, with the craters nearly touching.

<sup>3</sup> The main reason for the breakdown of the power buzzers was the cutting by shell fire of the earth-leads which spread out fan-wise from the instruments.

to see even their aiming posts, no other method was possible in the fog and darkness. Not much doubt was now felt at the various corps headquarters of the Fifth and Third Armies that the opening of fire by the enemy was the "real "thing". Orders were at once issued for the troops held in readiness behind the Battle Zone to "man battle stations", the code word for which, very suitably, was "Bustle". Despite fog and shelling, which compelled the troops to wear their gas masks, and caused them to hold on to each other like blind men as they stumbled forward in the darkness, this movement was generally completed in good time. Only a few units lost their way and were late or altogether failed to reach their stations; some battalions had not waited for the general order, and arrived at their stations before the bombardment began.

At 6 A.M., sunrise, the fog was still thick on the front of the Fifth and Third Armies, particularly on the right of the former in the valley of the Oise and along the St. Quentin canal, where even a column of troops at a distance of ten or twelve yards was lost to sight. As the sun rose, its disc could be seen faintly from the higher ground where the fog was thinner, but on the low ground the fog remained thick until well into the morning. The denseness of the fog towards 9.40 A.M., the time of the German assault, may be said to have varied inversely with the distance from the Oise valley near Barisis; it was thickest, and lasted longest, that is, until 1 P.M., on the right of the Fifth Army. Northwards it grew gradually less and cleared earlier. On the front of the IV. Corps (the second corps from the right of the Third Army) and of the VI. Corps next to it, visibility would seem to have been fairly good by 10 A.M., that is, a short time after the bombardment lifted, though the air on that front at the time of assault was obscured by the smoke of bursting shells.<sup>1</sup> It has been definitely established that over the Fifth Army area south of the Flesquières Salient, air observers could see nothing except in isolated places on the extreme left until after noon, whereas the pilots and observers of No. 59 Squadron, attached to the IV. Corps (Third Army), were able as early as 6.30 A.M. to see and report much of what was happening there.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 21, "Distribution of the fog, 21st March 1918".

<sup>2</sup> One observer of this squadron, who had gone up to reconnoitre at 6.15 A.M., was able to follow the German bombardment along the whole front of the IV. Corps. Other aeroplanes followed at 6.20, 6.25 and 6.30 A.M., and before noon six of them sent down many wireless calls to

The opening of the bombardment on the fronts which have been mentioned was notified to G.H.Q. in the usual 7 A.M. "morning report" from Armies; the Third Army had sent an earlier message at 6.15 A.M., "enemy bombardment started". The Fifth Army, in which a raid by the XVIII. Corps had resulted in the capture of 13 prisoners,<sup>1</sup> and the discovery of signs of considerable enemy movement, reported that the situation had otherwise been normal until 4.40 A.M. The First Army reported an unsuccessful enemy raid at 5.45 A.M. against Hill 70; a subsequent message at 9.30 A.M. added that at 5.15 A.M. the neighbourhoods of Gavrelle and Vermelles had been bombarded, but that at 7.30 A.M. all enemy fire had died down considerably. The Second Army reported raids by both sides, with enemy gas shelling of the Passchendaele sector, and systematic shelling of battery areas between Messines and the Ypres—Comines canal at 5 A.M. together with the bombardment by high-velocity guns of back areas, adding "hostile fire now slackening".

Owing to the fog which prevailed on the front of attack, visual signalling, the use of pigeons (many of which were gassed), and observation by aircraft (except in the IV. Corps area and, later, on the fronts of the VI. and XVII. Corps) proved impossible; movement over the shell-swept area, too, was difficult, so that runners employed by artillery and infantry, even if they did not lose their way in the fog, had little chance of getting through with safety, and then only with great delay, a mile an hour being good speed. Thus, after most of the cables had been cut, the commanders and troops in and behind the Battle Zone, wearing gas masks until nearly 11 A.M., were unable for many hours to ascertain what was happening on their front; similarly, the posts and redoubts in the Forward Zone, enshrouded in fog, were in ignorance of the situation around them. Generally speaking, to send news or to circulate orders became impossible, so little co-ordination prevailed and each unit fought as best it could.

It was not until 11.7 and 11.30 A.M., in telephone messages received from the Fifth and Third Armies, that

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the artillery, one observer despatching between 11.10 A.M. and 2.20 P.M. a stream of messages calling for fire on batteries and large bodies of infantry on the roads.

<sup>1</sup> Some of these prisoners, captured about 9 P.M. on the 20th, stated that the attack would take place on the 21st and the bombardment open at 4.40 A.M. This information was telephoned to Fifth Army headquarters, and thence to G.H.Q., neighbouring Armies, and corps of the Fifth Army.

Sir Douglas Haig heard of the advance of the enemy infantry, with the added commentary from liaison officers that there was still a thick fog, while no machine-gun fire could be heard. It was actually with relief that G.H.Q. recognized that the blow had at last fallen, that it knew the worst, and that the operations against the vital fronts of the First and Second Armies were evidently no more than feints. It seemed also that the bombardment reported from the French front was merely in the nature of a feint ; for although about 9 A.M., General Pétain reported that the enemy had begun shelling the Champagne front, except opposite Reims, later reports indicated that bombardment had been followed only by two raids.<sup>1</sup>

After two or three hours the enemy's gas shelling died down on the greater part of the front, and opportunity was taken by some units to change from night to day dispositions ; but bursts of fire were resumed later on special localities, so that gas masks had still to be worn for some time after the bombardment had ceased. Fire with high explosive shell, however, continued intense, then diminished somewhat on the Battle Zone, and for a short time fell very heavily on the Forward Zone, with smoke shell added in some sectors where the fog was thin. Finally, after a short but intense shelling and trench-mortaring of the front trenches, the German infantry moved forward behind a deep creeping barrage.

At 9.40 A.M.—so ran the German orders—the assault was timed to strike the British line on the front of the four corps of the Fifth Army north of the Oise, and of the VI.

<sup>1</sup> The following account is given in F.O.A. vi. (i.), pp. 235-6 :—

"General Pétain from an early hour had no doubt that the attack "against the British Army was the beginning of the great offensive in "preparation by the enemy since the defection of Russia ; everything "pointed to it, particularly the extent of the front of operations and the "power of the artillery employed. Nevertheless, it could not be affirmed, "at this moment, that the enemy would devote all the means at his "disposal to the battle between Oise and Scarpe, and that he would not "soon launch an assault against our positions in Champagne. During the "night of the 20th/21st, the German artillery had manifested a quite "abnormal activity on the front Argonne—Soissons, in front of our "Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Armies ; it continued to bombard our positions "in the course of the morning, and again in the afternoon, with much "more than the habitual violence ; on its part, the enemy infantry "launched reconnaissances against our lines and attempted several coups "de main ; in the Fourth Army area, between Maisons de Champagne and "Navarin, the enemy penetrated into our trenches, and there was hand- "to-hand fighting. It was still impossible to discover whether this "aggressive attitude was the prelude to an assault against the French "front, or a simple demonstration intended to divert our attention from "the British zone".

and IV. Corps of the Third Army ; the Flesquières Salient was to be pinched out later. It would seem, however, that some latitude in the matter of time was allowed to local commanders, or that discipline in the German Army was not what it had been ; for, according to British accounts, some sectors were attacked—apparently with the intention to make sure of a footing in the British front—at an earlier hour, one as early as 5.30 A.M., as will be seen in the narrative.<sup>1</sup>

Before the assault was delivered, the wire in many places on the British front had been cut by artillery fire, but by no means thoroughly ; to supplement this, during the bombardment, parties of German engineers had crept forward in the fog and improved the gaps. The front-line posts had suffered severely ; at some places, according to German accounts, the attacking infantry found that the garrisons had been killed, wounded or gassed almost to a man by the artillery and trench-mortar fire. On the other hand, the redoubts and defended areas further back in the Forward Zone seem, as a rule, to have escaped serious damage. Unfortunately, where the troops still remained capable of defence, they could not see to shoot until the attackers were within ten to a couple of hundred yards of them, according to their position in the line. Where they did send up the S.O.S. signals for artillery assistance, the fog prevented the lights from being observed. The machine-gun posts, and forward guns and batteries similarly could see little, except on portions of the Third Army front, until the enemy was actually among them throwing bombs ; neither did they dare to open fire at the figures in the mist, uncertain whether they were friends retiring or foes advancing. Even some brigade headquarters in the Fifth Army, e.g. the 42nd, did not know that a serious attack had begun until the enemy was upon them ; at best, the arrival of the runners from the front line and of the enemy was simultaneous. Consequently, although a desperate resistance was offered by the survivors of its garrison, the Forward Zone as a whole was overrun at the first rush, the machine guns still in action hardly firing a shot. Making good use of the valleys, where the fog lay heaviest, the leading waves of German infantry swept onwards towards the Battle Zone, leaving the posts and redoubts still holding out in the Forward Zone to be dealt with by special parties.

<sup>1</sup> Thus the assault of the German left on the 58th Division took place at 6.14 A.M.,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  hours before zero. ("Res. Jäger Bn. No. 15", p. 190).

Thus, with few exceptions, the posts were captured and the redoubts cut off from the rear and surrounded early in the fight, in some cases before their garrisons, except for hearing the sound of cheers, were aware that the enemy assault had begun. Nevertheless, many of the redoubts held out for several hours, some even for two days, before they were finally overcome. Their protracted resistance was not wasted ; although unable, owing to the fog, to delay to any serious degree the attack on the Battle Zone, or to prevent small enemy columns from passing between them, they detained for hours a large number of troops who would otherwise have been available to reinforce the attack. What they accomplished under such adverse conditions is some indication of the resistance that they might have offered if the weather had permitted a full development of fire power and of adequate artillery and machine-gun support ; more particularly could they have swept the valleys which afforded "covered ways" into the position, since the defence of these depended almost entirely on cross machine-gun fire. A disastrous feature of the success of the German attack in swamping the forward troops was not only the complete loss of a quarter or more of the battalions of the divisions attacked, but also the capture or destruction of a large proportion of their machine guns and Lewis guns, the lack of which was to prove a most serious handicap during the subsequent days of the battle.

In the fog, and in the confusion which followed, owing to the breakdown of communications, each party fought as best it could, and the battle was mainly carried on by battalions and small bodies, assisted by the divisional batteries. At first, as no news of the infantry action came back, and communications with observation posts and brigades were cut, it was impossible for the artillery commanders to know when to change from "counter-preparations" to "S.O.S. barrages." The heavy artillery batteries were mostly silent or firing slowly when the assault took place, and the first intimation which many of them received of the situation was the sight of infantry retiring through or past them. Teams, lorries and tractors had at an early hour been ordered up to positions near the batteries, and this precaution was the means of saving many guns which would otherwise have been lost.<sup>1</sup>

It must be emphasized that the organization for co-

<sup>1</sup> In the III. Corps, on the extreme right, the railway and 6-inch guns were at once sent back.

operation between the artillery and the Royal Flying Corps failed completely from the very first. For long periods, not only in the fog of the first morning but throughout the retreat, there was no communication between the batteries and the aeroplanes, although the zone call system had been introduced primarily to meet the conditions of open warfare. This unfortunate state of affairs was in no way due to the failure of the air officers to understand the importance of this co-operation or to carry out their share of it. In a memorandum on "The Employment of the Royal Flying Corps in Defence" Major-General Trenchard had laid down :—

Modern artillery plays such an important part in a defensive action that too much stress cannot be laid on the work of the corps machines. Counter-battery work without air observation is in most cases of little value. The best way, therefore, in which the Flying Corps can assist at this period [i.e., when the attack has begun] is by assuring a continuance in the air of artillery machines. If this object can be attained, it will be a far more effectual help to the infantry and artillery, though invisible to them, than any amount of low-flying or bombing against the enemy front-line troops.

The chief causes of failure were the severance of telephonic communication and the breakdown of the artillery wireless organization : batteries were continually on the move ; much telephone and wireless equipment was lost or damaged ; and when batteries halted they did not always erect their wireless masts. Even where masts were erected, the operators were often unaware of the particular zone covered by the guns of their battery, or the stations were too close to the guns and had inadequate cover for the wireless apparatus, so that reception was rendered extremely difficult. The majority of zone calls<sup>1</sup> sent down from the air during the first days of the battle were not answered whilst the air observers were waiting to observe the fire effect. The batteries, as a rule, took their instructions for bombardment or barrage from the divisions to which they belonged or were attached, communication between the staffs and batteries being kept up by mounted men. Thus batteries were not ready to respond to zone calls even when

<sup>1</sup> The use of zone calls, that is, calls asking for fire on particular squares of the map, enabled an air observer, if he were answered, to obtain an immediate shoot on any fleeting or important target. The allotment of batteries to answer the calls from the air was a matter of artillery organization.

they were received, and, as ground observation could not, as a rule, detect the advance of reinforcements, or assembly of troops or transport behind the line, great opportunities for doing damage were lost.

Contact patrol work and close reconnaissances were maintained by the Royal Flying Corps, and its reports often gave the corps staffs the best information which they received as to the movements of their fighting troops and of the enemy's advance. Only the surplus machines of the corps squadrons were employed in making machine-gun and bombing attacks, but the fighter squadrons and, as the battle developed, the bombing squadrons, were diverted more and more to making direct attacks on enemy troops and transport. The Third Army throughout received more assistance from the air than the Fifth, and by the 26th March no fewer than 37 out of the 58 squadrons of the Royal Flying Corps on the Western Front were employed, wholly or partly, on the front of the Third Army.

Such was the general course of the beginning of the battle over the entire front except the Flesquières Salient, on which no assault was made. Consequently the fighting on the 21st resolved itself into two distinct actions : that of the Fifth Army on the right of the Salient, and that of two corps of the Third Army on the left of it. The two actions, therefore, can, and will, be described separately.

## CHAPTER IX

THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

21ST MARCH 1918 (*continued*)

FIFTH ARMY<sup>1</sup>

(Maps 2, 3 ; Sketch 14)

THE FIRST ASSAULT

*III. Corps*

Map 2. Of the forty-two miles of front allotted to the four corps (12 divisions and three cavalry divisions) of the Fifth Army, Sketch 14. two miles lay across the marshy valley of the Oise, an area which—so it was stated by the French when they handed over the sector—did not permit of, or require, any trench line defences. On the three miles south of the Oise valley, occupied by the 58th Division (Major-General A. B. E. Cator), with one brigade north of the Oise, there was no assault. Thus the fighting front of the III. Corps on the 21st March amounted to about ten miles. It was Lieut.-General Butler's policy to keep his strength on the left, since his right (not reckoning the detachment south of the Oise) was protected by the course of that river and its canal; so the remaining brigade (173rd) of the 58th Division held roughly three miles, the 18th Division (Major-General R. P. Lee), four and a half, and the 14th Division (Major-General Sir V. A. Couper), two and a half. Consequently, omitting field companies R.E. and pioneer battalions, there was available an average strength of little more than one thousand rifles to the mile.

The centre of the corps front was covered, by the Oise

<sup>1</sup> For abbreviated Order of Battle, see end of Volume. The description of the front and general distribution of troops have been given in Chapter VI.

with its many branches and its canal ; but the river was almost dry and, in spite of assurances to the contrary, presented but a very slight obstacle ; moreover, the level of water in the canal had been lowered by the enemy. The Forward Zone, which extended nearly to the canal, was sited for the greater part on a forward slope, exposed to enemy observation on the eastern side of the valley ; on the other hand, the Battle Zone, almost for its entire extent, lay on the reverse slopes of the ridge between the Oise and the Crozat canal. On the western bank of this latter water-way was the Green Line, its right turned back clear of Tergnier.

For the great offensive General von Hutier (*Eighteenth Army*), whose four corps north of the Oise covered the two right corps of General Gough's Army, arranged his troops opposite the III. Corps, much on the same plan as General Butler, so as to be weak near the Oise and strong further north. Thus, opposite the long front held by the 173rd Brigade (58th Division) and the 18th Division were three divisions of *Group Gayl*, in line ; but opposite the short front of the 14th Division were the four divisions of the *IV. Reserve Corps* and the left of the *XVII. Corps*, a total of seven divisions.<sup>1</sup> The result of this distribution, and of the consequent odds in the enemy's favour in the northern sector, was that he broke through the Forward Zone and reached the Battle Zone of the 14th Division by about 11 A.M., at a time when elsewhere in the III. Corps area he was still involved in the Forward Zone.

As early as 6.10 A.M. German infantry advanced against the left of the 58th Division north of the Oise,<sup>2</sup> where the 173rd Brigade was holding its Forward Zone, over five thousand yards of front, with the 2/2nd London, by means of a number of defended areas, or rather groups of small posts, hundreds of yards apart. By 9 A.M., the fog still being very thick, a group of posts in an enclosed area round the ruins of some barracks west of La Fère was heavily engaged. A stout resistance was made and it was not until midday that these posts were overcome by the

<sup>1</sup> Four divisions in front line, two in the second line, and one in the third.

<sup>2</sup> According to German accounts, British patrols opposite La Fère were driven back during the night, and a bridge was thrown over the canal, by which some German infantry crossed and established themselves on the western bank. Thence the advance was begun at 6.14 A.M. on the 21st.

help of trench mortars and a pair of tanks.<sup>1</sup> Even then, part of the garrison, although attacked from the rear, succeeded in fighting its way out, and took part in the subsequent defence of the Battle Zone positions in rear. The defended area round Travecy (2 miles north of La Fère) was captured during the forenoon, except for a keep in the village, where the garrison, although entirely surrounded by 10 A.M., beat off repeated heavy attacks all through the 21st and until 8 P.M. on the 22nd, when lack of ammunition compelled the survivors to surrender.

The enemy gained no marked success against the 18th Division sector, next to that of the 58th, where there were three battalions (7/Buffs, 7/R. West Kent and 8/R. Berkshire) in the Forward Zone. Their fortunes will be followed in turn. About 7.15 A.M., before the main attack, the Germans gained possession of the canal lock half a mile north of Travecy, but there they paused and made practically no further progress for many hours, a party of the 7/Buffs near the lock in a quarry, the edge of which had been prepared for defence, holding out until 5.30 P.M. A platoon of the Buffs, on the eastern edge of the hill half a mile to the west of this lock, made an even more prolonged resistance in a defended area amid the ruins of some houses and enclosures. Completely surrounded by 11 A.M., the platoon beat off many attacks during the 21st and until 8 P.M. on the 22nd, when it was at last overcome after a close bombardment by field guns. Another defended area half a mile further west held out all day, and its garrison was successfully withdrawn to the Battle Zone after dark. At Vendeuil, which was attacked down the right (west) bank of the river from the north, small parties of the enemy first broke into the defences about 9 A.M., and gradually gained possession of most of the village, though at least one post held out till evening. On the hill immediately to the west of Vendeuil, however, a garrison in the old French fort held out against repeated assaults until the evening of the 22nd,<sup>2</sup> when, food and ammunition being exhausted and attempts at relief having failed, the remnant of the gallant defenders at last surrendered. A fine fight was also made by men of the Buffs in at least two other areas in this

<sup>1</sup> According to information kindly supplied by the *Reichsarchiv*, only 9 tanks were sent into action on the 21st, 4 of German construction and 5 captured British (Mark IV.). Their task was to "mop up" strongpoints and machine-gun nests.

<sup>2</sup> It was to have been taken by 11.15 A.M. on the 21st. "Regt. No. 71".

neighbourhood, where they held out all day, and then, with the help of patrols sent out from the Battle Zone—although the batteries situated forward of it were in the enemy hands—succeeded in withdrawing to that zone.

Moy, in the sector of the 7/R. West Kent, was attacked by small parties from 9 A.M. onwards ; but, in the general assault, the Germans failed, owing to the fog, to see the wire and, being caught in close formation, were shot down in large numbers. Nevertheless, by 10.30 A.M. the Germans had broken through in one or two places, and, in spite of effective heavy artillery fire, were across the La Fère—St. Quentin road, a mile further west. In this sector most of the Forward Zone defences were surrounded and captured before the fog cleared about 1 P.M., though at least one area, a mile west of Moy, and the battalion headquarters (under Lieut.-Colonel J. D. Crosthwaite, who was wounded), are known to have held out till 4.30 P.M.

Opposite Alaincourt, in the sector of the 8/R. Berkshire, some of the enemy, aided by the fog, had passed through the British front line and were attacking it from the rear even before 9 A.M. By 10.30 A.M. they had reached the farm at the cross roads a little south-east of Cérizy, on the top of the ridge about the middle of the Forward Zone, where they first came into view, advancing in a dense line, at a range of under fifty yards. Met by a fire which almost annihilated their front ranks, they then worked round the farm and opened on it with machine guns from the rear, causing many casualties. The locality, however, held out till 6 P.M., and before it was captured part of the garrison had cut its way through to the Battle Zone. Lieut.-Colonel R. H. Dewing, with a party of men of various units defended a quarry (formerly 53rd Brigade headquarters) in front of Ly Fontaine until night when he withdrew his party undisturbed.

Much of the field artillery was overrun by the enemy before the fog had completely lifted, the LXXXII. Brigade R.F.A. losing nine guns and howitzers, and the LXXXIII. Brigade all except one section, the two guns of which fired 1900 rounds between them.

The sector of the 14th Division ran north-westward away from the valley of the Oise, and thus had no natural obstacle to cover it ; in front lay a wide stretch of No Man's Land, sufficiently broken to afford the attackers excellent cover from machine-gun and rifle-fire, with two

valleys leading up into the British position. In view of this weakness, the front of the 6/Somerset L.I., 9/K.R.R.C. and 8/K.R.R.C. being in the form of a continuous trench with a chain of small posts in it, the numerous communication trenches were prepared for transverse defence ; and a large area round Urvillers and a number of smaller localities and crossings of trenches and roads were organized for all-round defence.

It was against the centre and left of the division, only recently brought down from Passchendaele, and the right of the 36th Division next to it, that the greatest weight of the attack was thrown. The right of the German *IV. Reserve Corps* and the left of the *XVII. Corps*, seven divisions strong, after having broken through at a point about the junction of the two British divisions, sent parties southwards along the high ground in rear of the front defences. A number of statements show that here also enemy advanced parties, at least, penetrated into the front line about 9 A.M. At any rate, very soon after that hour the whole of the line seems to have been lost ; and in the fog little columns of the leading waves of the attack passed between the defended areas of the Forward Zone and were beyond battalion headquarters, a mile or so behind, before it was known that the front line had been attacked. On the right of the 14th Division the enemy reached the Battle Zone, where another division of the *IV. Reserve Corps* was attacking before 11 A.M., and in the centre and on the left but little later. By this hour the fog was thinning rapidly on the high ground, and lines of Germans could be seen advancing, with supporting columns dotted all over the country. Various areas in the Forward Zone, completely cut off by the enemy, held out until well on into the afternoon, although trench mortars and field guns, and in some cases flame projectors, were employed against them. One keep, 600 yards west of Urvillers, garrisoned by the 9/K.R.R.C., continued resistance until 3.30 P.M., and another at the farm a mile south of Urvillers was not captured till 3 P.M. ; whilst some posts of the 8/K.R.R.C. in Urvillers itself held out till 4 P.M. and even later. But finally all were lost.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The German accounts specially mention the prolonged defence of Urvillers. See Note II. at end of Chapter X.

*XVIII. Corps*

The sector of the XVIII. Corps (Lieut-General Sir I. Maxse), a little over 9 miles in width, lay astride the valley of the upper Somme where the river is canalized by the St. Quentin canal, and across the small features and spurs and valleys which surround St. Quentin on the west. The front line encircled the south-western and western suburbs of the town, with its left extending almost to the valley of the Omignon. The Forward Zone was completely exposed to view from one point or another of the German line ; but the defences of the Battle Zone were for the most part sited on the reverse slopes falling to the Crozat canal and the Somme, which also provided good artillery positions. On the other hand, the valley of the upper Somme, and smaller valleys north of it, penetrated into the zone and formed approaches to it, difficult to defend at night or in thick weather.

The XVIII. Corps having a narrower front, the defences of the Forward Zone were more fully developed than those of the III. Corps. They included a number of posts about three hundred yards apart in the front line, whilst about the middle of the zone there was an intermediate line, a row of some 14 large defended areas, known as the Line of Redoubts. Less work had been done on the Battle Zone, which consisted of little more than a few groups of trenches with wire along the front, and it had no depth.

The orders of the XVIII. Corps made it perfectly clear that the forward troops were outposts and must if attacked fall back on the Line of Redoubts, which was to be the line of resistance, the artillery barring the spaces between the redoubts. There was to be no retirement from this line, which would receive no support from the rear except by counter-attack, which might not be delivered from the Battle Zone for 48 hours. The German assault, however, was pressed forward in the fog so quickly and in such strength that not one man in four of the outpost line troops got away.

Against the three divisions of the corps—the 36th (Ulster) Division (Major-General O. S. W. Nugent), the 30th Division (Major-General W. de L. Williams) and 61st (Major-General C. J. Mackenzie)—there were arrayed fourteen German divisions.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The right of the XVII. Corps, the IX. Corps and most of the III. Corps :—

6 divisions in front line (3 south of and in St. Quentin and 3 north) ;  
5 divisions in second line (1 south of St. Quentin and 4 north) ;

The attack, like that on the left of the III. Corps, was made with such great strength and determination that the garrison of the Forward Zone, scattered in small isolated parties, after a gallant resistance, was completely overwhelmed. Of the eight battalions composing it,<sup>1</sup> only some fifty men succeeded in fighting their way back to the Battle Zone.<sup>2</sup>

On the front of the 36th (Ulster) Division the assault took place at 9.40 A.M. when most of the advanced defences were quickly overrun, although one post in the front line held out till 1 P.M., another until 2.45 P.M., and the garrison of Le Pontchu (12/R. Irish Rifles), on the right of the third trench of the old front system, until 3.15 P.M.<sup>3</sup> By about 10 A.M. the attackers reached the Line of Redoubts forming the last line of defence of the Forward Zone ; but the mist remained so thick and information came back so slowly that the pre-arranged artillery barrage was not put down in front of this line until 12.5 P.M. The most easterly of the redoubts, situated on the Essigny—St. Quentin road and garrisoned by the 12/R. Irish Rifles, was overwhelmed before noon, and others soon followed ; but two—one on the railway south of Grugies (15/R. Irish Rifles),<sup>4</sup> and the other near the western end of the line (2/R. Inniskilling Fusiliers)—held out against repeated heavy attacks until after 6 P.M.

The course of events upon the fronts of the 30th and 61st Divisions, opposite St. Quentin, was similar to that in the 36th Division sector : the forward defences as a whole were captured after a short but desperate fight, while the Line of Redoubts in rear made a prolonged resistance. One of these redoubts, on the low ridge called l'Epine de Dallon, held by the 2/Wiltshire, fought till 2.30 P.M. ; another,

<sup>3</sup> in third line.

It will be noticed that the left boundary of the XVIII. Corps and the right boundary of the German *Eighteenth Army* practically coincided, so that Hutier's Army of 25 divisions had only 5½ British divisions opposite it.

<sup>1</sup> 12/ and 15/R. Irish Rifles, 2/R. Inniskilling Fus. of the 36th Division ; 2/Wiltshire, 16/Manchester of the 30th Division ;

2/8th Worcestershire, 2/4th Oxford & Buckinghamshire L.I., 1/5th Gordon Highlanders of the 61st Division.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, of the 2/8th Worcestershire, 1 officer and 6 men reported at brigade headquarters at 9 P.M.

<sup>3</sup> Tanks are reported to have been used in the capture of this area. Large bodies of the enemy worked down the valley towards Grugies, from the east, thus getting behind the defences to the north of the valley.

<sup>4</sup> 2/Lieut. E. de Wind was awarded a posthumous V.C. for the defence.

"Manchester Hill", a mile further north, garrisoned by the 16/Manchester, until 4.30 P.M.;<sup>1</sup> the next redoubt to the north, situated a mile east of Holnon, was held by the 2/8th Worcestershire till 5.15 P.M., and then again, one thousand yards further to the north-west, by battalion headquarters and two platoons of the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire L.I., until 4.30 P.M. Near the extreme left of the corps a redoubt on the northern outskirts of Fresnoy le Petit held by the 1/5th Gordon Highlanders, fell about 1.30 P.M. At all these points the survivors made desperate but vain attempts to break out and fight their way back to the Battle Zone when further resistance was impossible; including the headquarters of the 2/8th Worcestershire and the 2/4th Oxfordshire L.I. all were either killed or made prisoner. A number of field guns were lost, but some of them were recovered during the night.<sup>2</sup>

### *XIX. Corps*

The 12,000 yards sector of the XIX. Corps (Lieut.-General H. E. Watts), lay across the valley of the Omignon, extending to that of the Cologne on the western slopes of a series of spurs of the watershed between the Schelde and the Somme.<sup>3</sup> Opposite the southern two-thirds of the Forward Zone, No Man's Land was nearly two thousand yards wide, except on the small part south of the Omignon, where at Pontruet the front line ran forward and the enemy trenches were about one thousand yards distant. In this southern portion there were only isolated posts, well supported by machine-gun nests. In the northern third of the front, No Man's Land was narrow, and there was the normal three-line trench system. The Battle Zone consisted of a front line, and a wired but only partly dug line on its rear edge, with four large defended areas between: Vadencourt, Le Verguier, Jeancourt and Templeux le Guérard, all concealed by the ground from distant observa-

<sup>1</sup> Lieut.-Colonel W. Elstob, commanding the battalion, who was killed, was awarded a posthumous V.C. for his defence of the redoubt. The last message which came through from him was "Good-bye".

<sup>2</sup> Thus three batteries of the 307th Brigade were captured, only one section escaping under machine-gun fire. During the night of 21st/22nd limbers were taken up and 10 guns recovered without a single casualty, and one German prisoner was taken. The howitzers could not be got away.

<sup>3</sup> The Omignon in the front half of the Battle Zone widened out into a broad, deep lake, impassable except by the Vadencourt causeway (running north and south).

tion. Nine enemy divisions<sup>1</sup> attacked the two divisions of the corps, the 24th (Major-General A. C. Daly) and the 66th (Major-General N. Malcolm), which had the 1st Cavalry Division (Major-General R. L. Mullens) in reserve. There were seven battalions in the Forward Zone.<sup>2</sup>

It will be recalled that the sun dispersed the fog in this sector some time between 10.15 and 11.30 A.M., when the Germans were seen pouring down the slopes "like ants out of a disturbed nest"; in addition two low-flying aeroplanes appeared, which, however, were easily driven off by volleys of rifle fire.

On that portion of the 24th Division front south of the Omignon, the defences at Pontruet, with those at Berthaucourt behind them, were soon overwhelmed; a redoubt in continuation of the XVIII. Corps' series, one thousand yards south of the latter village, was surrounded and passed, the garrison of one and a half companies of the 1/North Staffordshire subsequently trying to fight its way out, but failing to do so, the whole of it being killed or captured. Meanwhile, the attack, pressing on in the fog down the Omignon valley without receiving any fire, reached the defences of the Battle Zone in front of Maissemy at 11 A.M.

Immediately north of the Omignon, the Forward Zone was traversed with equal celerity, the Battle Zone to the east and north-east of Vadencourt being engaged, and even penetrated at some points, by 11 A.M. Further north, the enemy, after breaking through the Forward Zone, was met by such a heavy fire from the 3/Rifle Brigade, in "Cookers' Quarry" south of Le Verguier,<sup>3</sup> from the 8/Queen's, east and north-east of that village, and from machine guns, that his advance was stopped, about 11 A.M., some hundreds of yards short of the Battle Zone. No further strong attacks were made in this region until well on into the afternoon.

Thus, although fighting continued for some time longer round the various localities in the Forward Zone, practically

<sup>1</sup> The right of the III. Corps and LI. and XIV. Corps, the left wing of the Second Army (General von der Marwitz), opposite the XIX. Corps, had 4 divisions in the front line, 3 in the second and 2 in the third.

<sup>2</sup> South of Vadencourt the line had been taken over from the French in February, but the 24th Division had been in the sector north of this point since 25th Oct. 1917. The 66th Division, on the other hand, had been in the Givenchy and Ypres sectors in 1917, and had only arrived in the Fifth Army area in mid-February 1918.

<sup>3</sup> Cookers' Quarry was on the left of the Bihécourt—Vadencourt road (known as "Watling Street") where it crossed the front line of the Battle Zone.

the whole front of the Battle Zone of the 24th Division was engaged when the fog cleared about 11 A.M.

The course of events on the front of the 66th Division was very similar. There the first waves of the German advance broke through the three trenches of the Forward Zone, and reached Villeret, the head of a spur behind it; but they were then fired into heavily from the village, now in their rear, and their further progress was checked. As the troops of the 16th Division, away on the left, were falling back, the garrison (2/6th Manchester) was soon attacked by German supporting troops, whose leading lines then rushed on against the Battle Zone, which was engaged by eleven o'clock.

The defences covering Hargicourt, which lay in a valley just in front of the Battle Zone and was garrisoned by the 4/East Lancashire, were penetrated in the last of the fog about 10.30 A.M.; then, attacked in front and on both flanks, such of the garrison as were not killed or captured, were soon pressed back into the Battle Zone.<sup>1</sup> The 2/8th Lancashire Fusiliers, holding the Forward Zone defences to the north of Hargicourt, suffered a similar fate, its headquarters being captured in a dug-out before becoming aware that the infantry attack had begun.

Thus, on the 66th Division front, as well as on that of the 24th Division, the enemy was everywhere engaging the Battle Zone by about 11 A.M., but without much artillery support. Nevertheless, as is attested by the German accounts, the struggle in the Forward Zone was desperate while it lasted, and the attacking troops suffered heavy losses.

### *VII. Corps*

The front of the Battle Zone of the VII. Corps (Lieut.- General Sir W. N. Congreve) ran along the top of a narrow ridge marked by Lempire and Epéhy. Thus the Forward Zone lay exposed to enemy view, on the line on which it had settled down after the Battle of Cambrai. It extended across a series of seven small spurs, and their intervening valleys, which ran down to the St. Quentin canal (there the canalized channel of the upper Schelde), about two and a half miles distant from the British front. The Battle Zone itself lay across fairly level ground, indented by three long

Map 3.  
Sketch 14.

<sup>1</sup> Hargicourt was heavily gas shelled by the British guns after the enemy had secured possession.

shallow valleys, dropping only slightly south-westwards, with the Green Line, well sited on reverse slopes, about two miles behind it.

The Forward Zone was somewhat narrow, and its front line averaged less than fifteen hundred yards from the Battle Zone. It consisted of a single front trench, but it was particularly well supplied with strongpoints, machine-gun nests and switches. There was a continuous trench along the front and rear lines of the Battle Zone, and north of Epéhy two intermediate trenches ; the villages of Ronssoy-Lempire and Epéhy were organized as large defended areas, a switch extending the former southwards, so as to provide complete flank defence for the zone ; there were also four smaller areas on the main spurs, and another around the northern part of Templeux le Guérard in the valley of the Cologne. The corps instructions were that in case of attack the posts in the front line were to retire, but the strongpoints and defended areas were to hold out to the last.

The eight-mile front was held by three divisions : the 16th (Irish) (Major-General Sir A. Hull), the 21st (Major-General D. G. M. Campbell), and the 9th (Scottish) (Br.-General H. H. Tudor, in temporary command). There were no less than 13 battalions in the Forward Zone ;<sup>1</sup> opposite them were ten German divisions.<sup>2</sup>

As might be expected from the German dispositions, the main attack was directed against the 16th and 21st Divisions. The right of the 9th Division, however, about Gauche Wood and for a short distance along the ridge immediately to the north of the wood, was also involved ; only half-hearted attempts were made against its left.

Against the 16th Division, whose front formed a pronounced salient, the infantry advance commenced, according to British accounts, before nine o'clock, and made rapid progress towards the Battle Zone, especially in the valley on the extreme right of the division. On this side the divisional boundary with the XIX. Corps ran diagonally to the front, and so rendered combination difficult. Two companies of the 7/Royal Irish posted in the Forward Zone suffered terribly ; not a man succeeded in escaping. Pen-

<sup>1</sup> See page 180.

<sup>2</sup> The XXIII. Reserve Corps (5 divisions) and the XIII. Corps (5 divisions), the latter being next to the Flesquières Salient, which was not to be attacked. There were 5 divisions in front line, 3 in second and 2 in the third.

tration was therefore easy and enabled the enemy to roll up the front of the division, and no warning of the advance reached the troops manning the Battle Zone defences before they were themselves attacked, in front of Ronssoy, as early as 9.30 A.M.

Progress through the Forward Zone on the remainder of the 16th Division front was almost equally rapid, the posts being enveloped and captured before the fog lifted. By 10 A.M. the enemy had gained a footing in the left front of the Battle Zone from which counter-attacks failed to expel him. By about 10.30 A.M., with fog still in the air, practically the whole of the front line of its Battle Zone was heavily engaged, though many of the posts in front of that line were still holding out, and some of them continued to do so for many hours.

The attack on the 21st Division was begun at 7 A.M. by an attempt of the enemy to enter the Forward Zone in front of Epéhy. It failed and was not resumed until about 9.40 A.M. In this divisional sector the Forward Zone had little depth, especially in the centre, north of Peiziére (northern end of Epéhy), where, for about one thousand yards, the space between the front lines of the Forward and Battle Zones was only some two to three hundred yards ; and the machine guns were all on the forward slopes. Moreover, in front of Epéhy and Peiziére, where the Battle Zone position was strong and continuous, it had been decided to withdraw the troops from the front defences of the Forward Zone at night and, in case of attack, to bring the defensive barrage down on the British front line there, instead of beyond it ; and this had been done.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the resulting lack of depth, the enemy's advance was delayed for some time by the 8/Leicestershire in the Forward Zone. Opposite the defences covering Epéhy itself the German infantry did not begin to appear until about 10.25 A.M., and did not reach Peiziére until nearly 11 A.M., a small penetration at this point being effected about that hour. The situation was, however, promptly restored by a counter-attack made by a company of the 7/Leicestershire from behind Peiziére, assisted by two tanks, and the security of the well-entrenched right flank of the 21st Division gave no cause for anxiety during the morning or early afternoon.

To the north of Peiziére as far as the divisional boundary the enemy was held in the Forward Zone until about

<sup>1</sup> Possibly this withdrawal was the cause of the 7 A.M. German raid.

noon by the 7/Leicestershire, 12th/13th Northumberland Fusiliers and the 1/Lincolnshire; the fighting round Vauzellette Farm, 1,200 yards north of Peiziére, was most severe. This farm, although in the Forward Zone, was regarded as of special importance since it gave observation over the whole valley back to Heudicourt station, and had been designed as part of the main line of resistance. First attacked towards 10 A.M., the garrison of the 12th/13th Northumberland Fusiliers held out against the desperate efforts made to capture it until about noon, when the enemy turned the position from the south and attacked it from the rear. By the time the farm had fallen, the resistance in the Forward Zone immediately to the north of it, and between it and Peiziére, appears to have died down, and by midday the whole front of the division along the Battle Zone was engaged. The fog had then cleared sufficiently for machine guns to be used with effect.

On the 9th Division front, Gauche Wood, held by a few small posts only, was first attacked towards ten o'clock. It was not, however, until about noon that the Germans gained complete possession of the wood, but they were then held up for the remainder of the day by a line of defences immediately to the west of it, and by fire from the ridge to the north,<sup>1</sup> where also the attack made no progress during the day. Still further north, on the left of the Army, some raids were made, but there was no serious attack, and the enemy gained no success.<sup>2</sup>

In this manner the first phase of the battle on the front of the Fifth Army ended by about 11 A.M. It left the enemy in possession of the Forward Zone, that is, the old front position, the only well-developed system of defence, and close up to the Battle Zone, except opposite Le Verguier, where he had been held off by two battalions of the 24th Division.

#### THE ENEMY ATTACKS IN THE BATTLE ZONE UP TO 2 P.M.

In his attacks on the Battle Zone of the Fifth Army the enemy received little assistance from artillery except the field guns accompanying the infantry. The British, as

<sup>1</sup> Known as Quentin Ridge, on which was a defensive work, known as Quentin Redoubt, a little north of Gauche Wood.

<sup>2</sup> The German 107th Division, opposite the left of the 9th Division, had orders to guard the flank of the attack. It did not, therefore, press with any vigour.

soon as the fog began to thin, were well supported by such field guns as remained available after the losses in the Forward Zone. They obtained little help, however, from the heavy artillery in position in and behind the Battle Zone. The failure of the normal means of communication, which had broken down, rendered such co-operation impossible ; and, though liaison was beginning to be re-established by mounted officers, targets could not be indicated with sufficient rapidity. The batteries were never able to ascertain in useful time where the front line was, which localities were occupied by our own men, and which by the enemy ; consequently they could only fire on pre-arranged lines into the enemy's rear areas. The fighting, therefore, was mainly carried on by the infantry, supported by field guns, machine guns and trench mortars, with occasional help from heavy guns and low-flying aeroplanes.

### *III. Corps*

No attack took place in the 58th Division sector south of the Oise. Between the Oise and the right of the 14th Division, the fog still being thick, the enemy made an attempt to advance soon after noon against a portion of the line of the 18th, the centre division of the corps ; but it was beaten off by the 2/4th London. The line was at once reinforced by the 182nd Tunnelling Company R.E. and half the 3/London from brigade reserve.

The Battle Zone of the 14th Division lay along the higher ground of what was called the Essigny plateau : actually two large flat spurs base-to-base, forming a T-head at right angles to the ridge which is the watershed between the Oise and Somme. To the rear the slopes of the spurs dropped gently to the Crozat canal. On the plateau were situated the villages of Benay and Essigny, the latter close to the boundary of the 14th with the 36th Division. The capture of the plateau would turn the positions held by the latter division on the north and by the 18th Division on the south.

It was against the right of the 14th Division that the enemy's first serious attack was directed. There, two out of three companies of the 7/K.R.R.C. holding the line some three hundred yards east of Benay, were surrounded and overwhelmed about 11 A.M. ; the third company was pressed back, fighting, on to its battalion headquarters in a sunken road about half a mile behind the village. Reinforced by two companies of the 9/Scottish Rifles, it remained there

until 1 A.M. on the 22nd, when the survivors, after the enemy had passed on in the fog without interfering with them, marched back through his lines to the Crozat canal. The 61st Field Company R.E. was similarly caught in trenches south of the village, and unable to get back to the bridge at Jussy until night. True to their theories, when the leading Germans met with resistance they evaded it and pushed on past the defenders' flanks. Benay itself was in the enemy's hands by noon, and half an hour later a British artillery brigade was ordered to shell it.

After eleven o'clock the attack spread quickly northwards along the rest of the Battle Zone of the 14th Division, where the defences and garrisons had suffered so severely from the original bombardment that the enemy broke through with little delay. Here again he pressed on, although some posts held out for hours, one, at least (6/Somerset L.I.), until 6.30 P.M. Essigny, garrisoned by the 7/Rifle Brigade, was entered about noon. Some of the posts there were instantly rushed in the fog, and the greater part of the village was in the enemy's hands soon after 1 P.M., but the Riflemen then clung to the rear trench of the Battle Zone, which ran from the southern end of the village to the railway station.<sup>1</sup> On the Benay—Essigny road, too, the 5/Oxfordshire and Bucks L.I. and 11/King's held on.

As a result of the enemy's successes, a great part of the Battle Zone on the Benay—Essigny plateau was in his hands by two o'clock, a disaster of the first magnitude for the XVIII. Corps to the north. A line, reinforced from local reserves, was held in the rear defences of the Battle Zone, from the divisional boundary near Hinacourt to the railway cutting south-west of Essigny, in touch with the 36th Division, which, as we shall see, formed a defensive flank on its right with the 108th Brigade, as pre-arranged. In front of this line the advance was stayed.

Meanwhile, Lieut.-General Butler, the corps commander, had taken steps to move forward his reserves; for, though information of the progress of the fight in the Forward Zone had been scanty during the morning, enough was learnt to show that the attack was on a serious scale.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It was not until 2.56 P.M. that the village was reported to be wholly in enemy hands. German accounts agree with this, saying between 2.15 and 3 P.M. ("Gren. Regt. No. 5"). The British artillery was then turned on to it. According to air reports, posts to the east and south-east of Essigny were still fighting at 3.50 P.M.

<sup>2</sup> The first disquieting news was received at III. Corps headquarters at 10.40 A.M. from the air. An observer reported that the enemy had already

During the forenoon, the transfer of the 8/London and the 18th Entrenching Battalion from the south of the Oise to the 173rd Brigade area was authorized ; a "pioneer battalion" of the 5th Cavalry Brigade (2nd Cavalry Division), 450 strong, which was at Jussy, was placed at the disposal of the 14th Division ;<sup>1</sup> details from the Corps Reinforcement Camp and Corps School were ordered to cover the bridges over the Crozat canal from Mennessis to Jussy, and the 12th Entrenching Battalion was sent up for work on defences near Frières Faillouel (3 miles south of Jussy) ; the one brigade in corps reserve for this long front<sup>2</sup> was moved forward to near Frières Faillouel, where it arrived about noon ; the 4th Dismounted Brigade was sent forward in 'buses to Viry-Noureuil ( $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles south-west of Tergnier), where it arrived at 1.30 P.M. and, with the III. Brigade R.H.A., was placed at the disposal of the 58th Division, although it actually gave assistance to the 18th Division. At 1.45 P.M. the 3rd Dismounted Brigade, moving also by 'bus, was ordered to take over the defence of the sector of the Crozat canal from Liez bridge to beyond Jussy (in which sector there were seven bridges), the Reinforcement Camp and Corps School details previously sent there coming under the brigade commander's orders. The brigade arrived in position at 8 P.M.

### *XVIII. Corps*

The Battle Zone of the 36th (Ulster) Division lay astride the Somme valley, and the retention of the area was entirely dependent on the ability of the divisions on the higher ground on its flanks to maintain their position.

penetrated into the sector between Essigny and Benay. Owing to the fog, this was the only message from the air before 1 P.M. After that hour there were many reports of great troop concentrations on all the roads leading to the Fifth Army battle front ; and in the afternoon and evening, until 7 P.M., when mist began to form, the progress of the Germans was reported with accuracy.

<sup>1</sup> Originally, one brigade of each cavalry division had provided a "pioneer battalion" or working party, about 450 men strong. Late on the 21st, a dismounted division was organized from each cavalry division, each brigade furnishing a battalion, 550 strong, of 4 companies (one from each regiment and a machine-gun company), which absorbed the pioneer battalion. The R.H.A. brigades were sent to reinforce the divisions in the line. Thus the divisional commanders were left with their staffs, two brigadiers and the led horses.

The dismounted divisions were soon dislocated and the dismounted brigades used separately.

<sup>2</sup> 54th Brigade, 18th Division.

The loss of the Essigny plateau made the situation of the 36th Division very difficult, and when its right was attacked about noon, the right company (1/R. Irish Fusiliers) was soon surrounded. This company, however, made a very gallant defence—it held out till 4.30 P.M.—and steps were taken to secure the flank by bringing up the 9/R. Irish Fusiliers from divisional reserve, supported later by the 9/R. Inniskilling Fusiliers, to hold the railway to the west of Essigny; for here the track ran in a deep cutting of which it was feared the enemy might take advantage. For some time attacks made on the remainder of the divisional front failed to penetrate the Battle Zone defences, except at Contescourt, on the canal at the bottom of the valley, where the garrison (part of the 1/R. Irish Rifles, with a company of the 2nd Battalion attached) proved inadequate for its task owing to the losses suffered whilst moving into position. These trenches were attacked about 12.30 P.M. and soon captured, after a counter-attack by one company had failed to retrieve the situation; but as soon as the fog disappeared, all attempts at further penetration were repulsed in front of the defences immediately to the south and south-east of the village.

North of the Somme valley, up to two o'clock, there was no penetration of any part of the Battle Zone held by the 30th and 61st Divisions, whose trenches were well sited, mainly on the reverse slopes of a long north and south ridge. As the fog no longer concealed his movements the enemy ceased to advance over the open, and tried to work up the trenches by bombing. An effort to capture Roupy, in the centre of the 30th Division front, about 1.30 P.M. was repulsed by the 2/Green Howards. Savy, close in front of the Battle Zone, was occupied by the enemy shortly after one o'clock, and at 1.50 P.M. he was observed massing to the east of it; but no serious attack developed until later, nor did the German infantry attempt to attack the strong defences on the Holnon plateau, where the ridge widened out in the centre of the 61st Division area.

On the left of the corps the situation was more threatening, owing to penetration on the right of the XIX. Corps in the Omignon valley. The 61st Division, however, provided against danger on this side by throwing back a defensive flank, and retained a firm hold on the ridge south of Maissemy.

Thus at 2 P.M. practically the whole of the XVIII. Corps Battle Zone was still held, and its security unshaken. Communication by buried cable held good with some of the

redoubts in the Forward Zone, whose garrisons, it was known, were still fighting gallantly ; but a few only of the advanced field guns had been successfully withdrawn into the Battle Zone, many having to be abandoned, after being rendered unserviceable, owing to machine-gun fire in the fog at close range. The corps reserves were still in hand ; and the 20th Division, taken by General Gough from G.H.Q. reserve, had been placed at General Maxse's disposal at 1 P.M.

### *XIX. Corps*

The Battle Zone of the XIX. Corps lay on ground very favourable for defence, a sea of low ridges and shallow depressions between the valleys of the Omignon and the Cologne. Unfortunately in the fog the Germans had, as already described, not only reached and engaged the zone along its whole front by 11 A.M., but, although the fog cleared off soon after, had obtained a footing in it at some points. During the next three hours they gained further successes in this area.

A company of the 9/East Surrey posted in front of Maissemy, which is in the Omignon valley near the middle of the Battle Zone, was heavily attacked about 11.30 A.M. Turned on both flanks and surrounded, it fought gallantly for nearly two hours ; then the enemy closed on it, capturing the twenty survivors. Meanwhile other German troops had pushed on against Maissemy itself. Here the garrison, one company of the 1/North Staffordshire in a trench too long for it to defend successfully, was attacked from the rear, and nearly surrounded by noon ; it managed to break out, but only two officers and ten men reached Villecholles on the rear edge of the Battle Zone. The headquarters of the 1/North Staffordshire, in a sunken road south of Maissemy, was also surrounded, and only two or three wounded survivors were able to get away. The German advance then continued down the valley, and soon after noon a report reached corps headquarters that the flank of the Battle Zone had been turned. Fortunately a reinforcement of three companies of the 9/East Surrey, and two companies of the 12/Sherwood Foresters (Pioneers) had been brought up to the east of Villecholles, and, with the help of some 18-pdrs., an artillery major taking command of the force, the Germans were stopped about midway between Maissemy and Villecholles, and there the defence held firm.

North of the Omignon, still in the 24th Division area, Cookers' Quarry, half-way down a slope facing another gentle rise, and Le Verguier were holding out, but the penetration of the Battle Zone front line was effected about 11 A.M. The entry of the enemy forced the defenders back to a second line, which included Vadencourt, and ran thence nearly due north, joining the front of the Battle Zone again half a mile or so to the south-east of Le Verguier. On this line, held by the 8/R. West Kent and the 3/Rifle Brigade, and on both sides of Le Verguier, held by the 8/Queen's, very heavy fighting continued during the afternoon, the enemy suffering heavily from rifle and machine-gun fire in repeated vain attempts to pierce the defences.<sup>1</sup> The defenders of Vadencourt (300 men of the 8/R. West Kent) had admirable targets on either side, but the machine guns of the garrison were unable to reach columns of German reserves seen advancing south of the Omignon.

On the front of the 66th Division, from Grand Priel woods, on the right, to Templeux le Guérard in the Cologne valley, this village being situated about the middle of the left boundary of the corps Battle Zone, there was also a severe struggle. By 11 A.M. the attack had penetrated into the woods, which lay just in front of the Battle Zone, but there was heavy fighting before the Germans secured the whole of the western edge. Meanwhile some of them had succeeded in breaking into the Battle Zone at the junction of the 24th and 66th Divisions and reaching Brosse Wood, half a mile inside it. Here their progress was stopped by a company of the 2/7th Manchester, with its battalion headquarters, which made a fine defence in the northern part of the wood for some hours.

North of the Grand Priel woods the enemy was detained for some time by the 2/6th Manchester around Fervaque Farm in the front line of the Battle Zone, opposite Villeret. Several attacks were beaten off, and it was not until 1.30 P.M. that the British resistance was overcome by the aid of liquid fire.<sup>2</sup> The enemy then pushed on again towards Hesbécourt, in the rear part of the Battle Zone; but he had by that time got beyond the reach of artillery assistance, and his advance was brought to a standstill on the general

<sup>1</sup> An attempt to advance against Vadencourt from the south of the river was frustrated by the R.E. blowing up, under fire, the bridge leading from Maissemy.

<sup>2</sup> When the farm was captured, only 8 men remained fit for duty out of a garrison of a company.

line of the Jeancourt—Hargicourt road, which ran diagonally across the zone.

Further north, the attack was checked until after midday, behind Hargicourt by a company of the 9/Manchester in a sunken road, and by two companies of the 2/5th Manchester, at some quarries, called "Higson's Quarries"; and it was subsequently held up in front of two redoubts, known as "Trinity" and "Trinket," 300 yards apart and midway between Hargicourt and Hesbécourt, garrisoned by two companies of the 9/R. Sussex of the 73rd Brigade, which had been in corps reserve.

Between Hargicourt and the left boundary of the corps, the front defences of the Battle Zone were soon broken through, and the attack then reached Templeux Quarries.<sup>1</sup> These had been very heavily gassed during the bombardment, and the enemy at first contented himself with maintaining heavy machine-gun and rifle fire on them, while passing up the valley on either side, chiefly on the northern side, against Templeux le Guérard, and against the right flank of the 16th Division in the VII. Corps area. The northern part of the village was entered about noon; but a company of the 6/Lancashire Fusiliers posted to the east and clear of the village buildings, prevented the enemy from advancing any further, and a prompt counter-attack by two other companies of this battalion, supported by the former, cleared the village of Germans except for a pocket at a road junction at the northern end. About this time XIX. Corps headquarters heard that the right flank of the corps was turned; soon there came tidings of the loss of Templeux le Guérard, and the turning of the left. This was only too true, for about 2 P.M. the enemy had been reinforced. Field and horse artillery shelled these reinforcements as they assembled both here and across the valley in the 16th Division area—the gunners being much cheered at seeing the effect of their fire—but the Germans attacked, and, with the vantage of their holding at the road junction, gradually pushed the Lancashire Fusiliers out of the village.

Part of the garrison in the quarries to the east succeeded in breaking back during these events; but since an order

<sup>1</sup> These quarries, measuring some four hundred yards each way, stand out very conspicuously on the southern edge of the Cologne valley, north-east of Templeux le Guérard. They were held by 2½ companies and headquarters of the 2/7th Lancashire Fus. and 2 companies of the 1/5th Border Regt. (Pioneers).

to retire had miscarried, the remainder held on till about 5 P.M., when they were compelled to surrender.

The result of the struggle on the XIX. Corps front, in which both sides suffered heavily, was that, about 2 P.M., the line of defence in the Battle Zone formed a salient, with its apex in the front line at Le Verguier, and its two sides inclining back towards the rear line, the end of the right being in front of Villecholles, and that of the left near the rear edge of Templeux le Guérard. The heavy artillery had therefore been ordered to move back its flank batteries.

The corps reserves had not, so far, become engaged. The 73rd Brigade (24th Division), however, had been sent early in the morning to garrison trenches within the Battle Zone, and being spread out over a long line was not available at short notice. The 1st Cavalry Division had been ordered up at 12.45 P.M. to Bernes, near the Green Line, four miles behind Le Verguier, where its 1st Brigade (dismounted) was placed at the disposal of the 24th Division, and the pioneer battalion formed from its 2nd Brigade, at the disposal of the 66th Division.<sup>1</sup> Of the 1st Cavalry Brigade, the 11th Hussars was sent to Villecholles, and the Queen's Bays and the 5th Dragoon Guards to a switch line running from the south of Le Verguier to the rear of the Battle Zone, a mile west of Vadencourt, where their timely arrival, about 5 P.M., was most valuable, although a proposed counter-attack was abandoned by order of the 72nd Brigade. The 2nd Cavalry Brigade Pioneer Battalion was concentrated about Roisel, two miles west of Templeux le Guérard, towards 1 P.M. and remained there until later in the day, when it was joined by another hundred men and became the 2nd Dismounted Brigade.

### *VII. Corps*

**Map 3.** The front of the Battle Zone of the VII. Corps ran along the crest of a ridge marked by Ronssoy—Lempire and Epéhy—Pezière, with the Cologne valley (in which is Templeux le Guérard) on its right making a weak diagonal boundary with the 66th Division. Towards the left the line was well down the front slope, encircling Gouzeaucourt. On the enemy's side, numerous valleys, by which he had worked upwards through the Forward Zone, descended

<sup>1</sup> This reduced the 1st Cavalry Division to a single cavalry brigade, the 9th; for the R.H.A. had also been broken up, one battery going to the 24th Division, one to the 66th and the third to corps reserve.

from the ridge towards the Schelde. In the centre, a wide flat spur projected backwards from Epéhy to Saulcourt and Guyencourt ; otherwise the ground, divided by three rather broad valleys, fell gently rearwards.

Whilst the struggle on the front of the 66th Division, just narrated, was developing, the 16th Division was also hard beset. The Germans, having gained a footing in the upper part of the Cologne valley in the front of the Battle Zone of the 66th Division had proceeded, about 10 A.M., to envelop the defences of Ronssoy (7th/8th R. Inniskilling Fusiliers) from the south-west, south and south-east. By 11.30 A.M., after a severe struggle, they had forced an entry, and shortly after noon had obtained possession of the village, although some posts held out until the evening, by which time all the men of the Fusiliers had been killed or captured.

The enemy attack was pushed northwards so as to roll up the front of the 16th Division ; posts in a wood to the north of Ronssoy, and a factory (Râperie) just to the west of the village were captured by 1 P.M. A counter-attack by two battalions of the 47th Brigade, in reserve, was ordered but subsequently cancelled by divisional headquarters ; but this counter-order did not reach the 6/Connaught Rangers in time. The battalion, with two tanks, moved forward eastwards against Ronssoy about 1.30 P.M. There was no artillery to support it, the field batteries near either having been captured or being engaged in trying to bring off the guns under machine-gun fire ; thus, worried by low-flying aeroplanes and receiving heavy enfilade fire from the right, the counter-attack failed.

Whilst Ronssoy was being captured from the south, a very severe struggle was raging in and around Lempire, on the top of the ridge above Ronssoy, where there was practically no break between the houses forming the two villages. The front line of the Battle Zone formed a sharp salient round Lempire, so that the garrison (2/R. Irish), exposed to attack on three sides, was eventually cut off by the fall of Ronssoy and the wood near by. After a desperate fight, most of the battalion was killed or captured ; but the enemy was not able to establish himself in Lempire until towards 2 P.M., although his infantry was passing through it earlier. Even then some posts in and around the village held out until a much later hour.

Between the Lempire defences and those of Malassise Farm, about one mile to the north-west, the enemy gained

a footing at some points of the Battle Zone between 10 and 11 A.M., and the farm (held by the 2/R. Dublin Fusiliers) was captured about the latter hour. Local counter-attacks were then delivered and it was not until nearly 2 P.M. that this line of defence was finally lost. The front between Malassise Farm and the left boundary of the 16th Division held out for some hours longer.<sup>1</sup>

Thus soon after 2 P.M. on the 16th Division front the Germans, having already captured Templeux le Guérard from the 66th Division on its flank, were in possession of Ronssoy, the Râperie, Ronssoy Wood and Lempire ; they were continuing to advance in this quarter ; indeed parties were by this hour half a mile or more beyond Ronssoy, moving south-westward on the ridge on the northern side of the Cologne valley, and westward on the ridge running towards St. Emilie (2 miles west of Ronssoy). In front of this advance remnants of the garrisons of the captured defences were falling back fighting towards the rear line of the Battle Zone, which ran from the divisional boundary in the valley nearly half a mile west of Templeux le Guérard, passing just east of St. Emilie, to the railway one mile due south of the southern end of Epéhy. In this rear line of defences, besides a number of artillerymen whose guns had been lost, there were two battalions of the reserve brigade (47th),<sup>2</sup> one of which (6/Connaught Rangers) had made the counter-attack already mentioned towards Ronssoy. Behind these two battalions (the second was the 1/R. Munster Fusiliers), the third battalion (2/Leinster) of the same brigade was moving up from near Villers Faucon (one mile west of St. Emilie) to reinforce, whilst the divisional pioneer battalion (11/Hampshire) was at St. Emilie.

Against the 21st Division the enemy<sup>3</sup> failed, up to 2 P.M., to make any impression on the Battle Zone defences covering the double village of Epéhy—Peizière (6th, 7th and 8/Leicestershire), except for one temporary penetration, already mentioned, into the north-eastern corner of the latter village. Between Peizière and the left of the division, however, the front defences of the Battle Zone, held by

<sup>1</sup> The defence was continued until 5 P.M., when the remnants of the garrison fell back on Epéhy, joining in the defence there. One post on the ridge held out until next day.

<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the day the 47th Brigade was in corps reserve, but the 16th Division had a call on the 6/Connaught Rangers in case of need. The 1/R. Munster Fus. was placed at the disposal of the division at 12.15 P.M. and the 2/Leinster at 1.55 P.M.

<sup>3</sup> The 183rd Division was to take Epéhy and the 27th the sector held by the 12th/18th Northumberland Fus. and the Lincolnshire.

elements of the 12th/13th Northumberland Fusiliers and 2/Lincolnshire were heavily attacked by two enemy divisions. At this point the ridge was very narrow and had the wide Heudicourt valley behind it. There the line was broken through between noon and 1 P.M., although the 1/Lincolnshire, on the extreme left, held on to a long knoll, known as "Chapel Hill" and the adjacent railway crossing ; by 1.20 P.M. the Germans had penetrated into the valley towards Heudicourt to a depth of over a thousand yards. Such a misfortune had not been unexpected, owing to the lack of depth in the defences, so that special measures had been taken to deal with the contingency. Field guns and machine guns had been placed to command the valley to the east of Heudicourt from north, south and west ; the 62nd Brigade was ordered to form a right defensive flank ; while the 9th Division, to the north, had specially organized Revelon Farm, near the south-western corner of its Battle Zone. Thus, when the fog lifted, the Germans in this area—a mass of infantry and two brigades of artillery—found themselves "pocketed" in a veritable death trap ; their efforts to push on westwards were consequently soon brought to a stand, and cost them very heavy casualties.

Chapel Hill and the crossing, meanwhile, were held against all attacks ; but about noon a report to the contrary reached the South African Brigade, holding the right of the 9th Division sector. As Chapel Hill overlooked the defences to the north, the South African Brigade sent at once to clear up the situation a company, which reinforced the 1/Lincolnshire and the part of the 2nd which had joined it. With the exception of this anxiety as to the situation on its right flank, the 9th Division held its positions without serious difficulty, Gauche Wood in the right of the Forward Zone being the only part of it that the enemy succeeded in capturing.

Thus the situation on the left and in the centre of the VII. Corps, except for the penetration towards Heudicourt, which had been met, was satisfactory ; in fact, as Lieut.-General Congreve reported, the 9th Division had not been seriously attacked. On the right, where the situation had become dangerous owing to the enemy's success in the Ronssoy sector and his progress down the Cologne valley to Templeux le Guérard, there was hope that the enemy's thrust would be met by reinforcements. The 39th Division (Br.-General M. L. Hornby in temporary com-

mand),<sup>1</sup> previously released from G.H.Q. reserve, was at noon (it moved at 12.35 P.M.) placed at the disposal of the VII. Corps commander, who immediately allotted one brigade (116th less 11/R. Sussex) and the two artillery brigades (174th and 186th) to reinforce the 16th Division. These reinforcements were still six miles from the battle-field at 2 P.M., so that Major-General Hull, then hearing of the help which was on its way to him, had still to depend for some time upon his own resources.

General Gough was in telephone communication with his corps commanders, and before 10.30 A.M. he had received the following information :—

III. Corps : the 18th Division had repulsed an attack, and the 14th Division reported that it was fighting in the Forward and Battle positions.

Maps 2,  
3.  
Sketch 14. XVIII. Corps : reported its line intact.

XIX. Corps : the 66th Division reported that the "situation seems developing".

VII. Corps : reported attacks on Lempire ridge and Gauche Wood.

Soon afterwards, the III. Corps reported that the enemy, debouching from La Fère, had taken the Forward Zone north of the Oise. Between 10.30 A.M. and 11.30 A.M., moreover, the messages showed that the attack was general along the whole Army front, and that everywhere the enemy had penetrated the Forward Zone, though many isolated redoubts were still holding out and still able to communicate with their divisional headquarters.

At 12.15 P.M. the XIX. Corps reported "Front Battle "Zone is being turned from the north". This pointed to the loss of Ronssoy, shortly afterwards confirmed by the 16th Division which had been holding the village. Lieut-General Congreve (VII. Corps) stated that he was dealing with the situation and sending up reserves, and that his 21st and 9th Division were holding their line firmly, although heavy fighting was going on.

These messages were not seriously alarming; more ominous were the air reports which began to come in from 1 P.M. onwards. These revealed that masses of Germans could be seen moving forward, and that the roads in

<sup>1</sup> The 39th Division (H.Q. at Haut Allaines, north of Péronne) was disposed in and behind the Green Line, from Tincourt (in the Cologne river valley) northwards through Nurlu. It had practised a counter-attack from St. Emilie.

their rear for ten to fifteen miles were "packed with troops".

No general situation report was sent from the Fifth Army to G.H.Q. until 11 P.M.; but the telegraphed reports from the four corps were forwarded on immediately as giving the best and latest available idea of the state of affairs. Being naturally several hours behind events, these were by no means clear, and were tinged with optimism, giving little more than the names of the places held or lost, with little indication of what was taking place. It was, and is, quite impossible to deduce the real situation from them, or to discover where the heaviest thrusts were being made. Thus at 2.40 P.M. the telegram (translating the code words) was :

" III. Corps reports 1.15 P.M. enemy between Essigny " and Benay. We hold Ly Fontaine [in the middle of the " Battle Zone 2 miles south of Benay]. Enemy reported " at Guingette Farm [ $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles east of Benay in the Forward " Zone] and Ronquinet Farm [2 miles south of Ly Fontaine " in the front of the Battle Zone]. We hold Liez Fort [in " the rear of the Battle Zone, 3 miles north of the Oise] and " southern divisional Battle Zone is intact".

General Gough spoke to all four corps commanders on the telephone and informed them that the policy was to fight a delaying action, holding up the enemy as long as possible without involving their troops in a decisive struggle to retain any one position. About 3 P.M. he decided to visit them at their headquarters. He therefore motored in turn to Ugny le Gay (7 miles west of Tergnier), Ham, Catelet ( $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles south-west of Péronne) and Templeux la Fosse (6 miles west of Templeux le Guérard), a round trip from Nesle of about sixty miles. The news he then learnt represented what was known of the situation at the front between 1 and 2 P.M. At the III. Corps Lieut.-General Butler—in action as a corps commander for the first time—represented that his left, the 14th Division, had been very severely handled and driven back for a considerable distance, thus exposing the left of the 18th Division, the right of which was also being threatened from La Fère. General Gough thereupon decided to withdraw the whole corps behind the Crozat canal, to which the 3rd Cavalry Division from Army reserve was already moving,<sup>1</sup> and he directed Lieut.-General Butler to be prepared to retire.

<sup>1</sup> Such a retirement had been foreseen in the G.H.Q. instructions of 9th Feb.; see page 98.

At the XVIII. Corps he found Lieut.-General Maxse confident, and learnt that his Battle Zone after desperate fighting was held intact, although the eight battalions in the Forward Zone had been almost annihilated.

In the XIX. Corps, where Lieut-General Watts had only two weak divisions, with the 1st Cavalry Division in support, the prospect seemed very serious. Here the Forward Zone had been overrun, its right at Maissemy rolled up, and its left exposed by the loss of Templeux le Guérard ; but its centre at Le Verguier was maintaining a stout defence. General Gough directed the corps commander to hold his present position as long as possible, but to bend back his left to keep in touch with the VII. Corps ; he mentioned that the 50th Division had been allotted to the XIX. Corps, but was too far away to arrive that day.

In the VII. Corps, except for the loss of Ronssoy, which Lieut.-General Congreve was dealing with by bringing up the 39th Division, the situation was very satisfactory, as the 21st and 9th Divisions were holding their own, while the V. Corps (Third Army) in the Flesquières Salient on the left seemed secure.

The situation in the Fifth Army at 2 P.M.—not formally reported to G.H.Q. until 11 P.M.—may be summed up thus : the Forward Zone was virtually lost ; the extreme right and left of the Battle Zone, not strongly attacked, were still holding on, but there had been dangerous penetration into the zone on the Essigny plateau, down the valleys of the Somme (Contescourt), of the Omignon (to near Ville-cholles), of the Cologne (to Templeux le Guérard), and in the Heudicourt valley. On account of the loss of the Essigny plateau, the III. Corps was to retire to the Crozat canal. This movement, if the right of the XVIII. Corps conformed, would greatly improve the British position ; it did not entail any retirement of the French, as the British right south of the Oise, forming the pivot of the withdrawal, would not move.

#### THE BATTLE AFTER 2 P.M.

##### *III. Corps*

Map 2. About 2 P.M.,<sup>1</sup> whilst visibility was still limited in this Sketch sector, an attack began to develop against the Battle Zone 14. of the portion of the 58th Division north of the Oise, also against the 18th Division next to it, that is between

<sup>1</sup> "Res. Jäger Batn. No. 15" puts the time of advance at 1.45 P.M.

Fargniers and Hinacourt. Until nightfall—even to a later hour in many places—fierce fighting continued along this front, without the enemy obtaining any marked success; for he was not more than about five to two (3 divisions against 1½).

On the right of the 173rd Brigade, the south-eastern outskirts of Fargniers in the Battle Zone were entered by the enemy about two o'clock; but, after a sharp struggle, he was—with the help of the artillery which did very effective work throughout the fighting at Fargniers—driven out again by men of the 2/4th and 3/London, and retired towards the canal.<sup>1</sup> The village was reinforced during the afternoon, first by a further one and a half companies of the 3/London and then by the 182nd Tunnelling Company R.E. Two platoons of the 3/London were also sent to reinforce Ferme Rouge, north-east of Quessey. But the attacking troops after a pause of an hour or more renewed the struggle and about 6 P.M. succeeded for the second time in entering the village, also capturing a machine-gun post southwards of it. A severe struggle inside Fargniers continued for some time; but eventually, with the assistance of two more companies of the 3/London, the attacking force was once more driven out.<sup>2</sup> The fighting died down on the outskirts of the village towards 9 P.M., when the garrison was in possession of prisoners of 27 different battalions, and there was no other sign of Germans except their dead.

The attack further north, on the remainder of the 173rd Brigade Battle Zone, was begun about the same time as the first attack on Fargniers, considerable bodies of German troops being seen in front of the Battle Zone east of Quessey as the fog lifted. It was not until between 3 and 4 P.M. that the enemy, after very hard fighting, succeeded in breaking through the first defences in that sector; even then he met with equally determined resistance within the Battle Zone. When about 8 P.M. fighting ceased for the night, the 2/4th London was still holding positions on the rear edge of the zone about Quessey and the Fabrique de Quessey, three-quarters of a mile north-east of the village, covering the passages over the Crozat canal.

<sup>1</sup> According to German accounts, the attacking troops suffered heavily, not only from the British fire, but through being caught by their own barrage during the struggle.

<sup>2</sup> According to a German account, the advance was renewed a third time about dusk and again Fargniers was entered; but in the British reports there is no mention of this third attack, which no doubt was made during the night after the withdrawal of the troops of the 58th Division.

On the 18th Division front, the 7/Buffs had made such a stout resistance in the Forward Zone that the Battle Zone of the 55th Brigade was not attacked. In the sector of the 53rd Brigade, next to it, the enemy pressed his assaults from 2 P.M. till nightfall, supporting them by heavy artillery fire directed by signal lights, whilst low-flying aeroplanes harried the defence with machine guns. In spite of his efforts he was everywhere held off successfully by rifle, machine-gun and artillery fire, except on the extreme left. That flank, which was turned as the outcome of the successful attack about Benay and Essigny, was compelled to give ground ; Hinacourt, also, at the back of the Battle Zone, after attacks from the east had been repulsed, was eventually captured from the north a little after 3 P.M. Nevertheless the Germans advanced no further and steps were taken to reinforce this flank. The 8/East Surrey, in divisional reserve, which had already been brought forward from La Tombelle to Remigny, behind the centre of the Battle Zone, was ordered at 3.15 P.M. to occupy a line between Ly Fontaine and Gibercourt to cover the left, and arrived there about 5 P.M. Later, the 54th Brigade, the corps reserve, at Frières-Faillouel behind the centre of the Green Line, was moved forward to the same area, arriving about 6.45 P.M.

Meanwhile, the 14th Division was clinging on to the rear line of the Battle Zone to which it had been forced back at 2 P.M.,<sup>1</sup> and the 5th Cavalry Brigade (dismounted) was moved up to its assistance, coming into position between four and five o'clock near Montescourt, to prolong the Ly Fontaine—Gibercourt flank and maintain connection between the 18th and 14th Divisions.

Throughout the evening the latter division continued to offer desperate resistance, keeping touch along the Tergnier—Essigny railway line with the 36th Division on its left. It was aided by very effective fire from the artillery which engaged many enemy concentrations, sometimes firing over open sights, with good results. Yet by 5.30 P.M., though part of the Benay—Essigny road was still held, the main

<sup>1</sup> One of very many notable local resistances was made by C Battery of the LXXXVIII. Brigade R.F.A. 18th Division artillery. This battery, just south of Benay, was rushed about noon and the personnel then took position in a sunken road between Benay and Hinacourt. There, with rifles, two machine guns and two 18-pdrs., this small party, under the captain of the battery, held up the enemy until after nightfall.

B/XLVI. Battery R.F.A., and no doubt other batteries, collected rifles and Lewis guns and drove off the Germans.

line of the defenders had been pushed entirely out of the Battle Zone. Touch with the 18th Division was lost for a time, German parties penetrating into the gap some distance towards Gibercourt. The situation there was restored, however, by the 5th Dismounted Brigade sent up to form a flank and, in spite of its very wide front, the division succeeded in maintaining a line behind its Battle Zone until fighting died down after dark. There is no question that General Gough was correct in his judgment that the III. Corps must fall back.

### XVIII. Corps

The steps taken by the 36th Division to protect its right flank, as already described, were successful : touch with the hard pressed left of the 14th Division was maintained to the south-west of Essigny for a time ; but it was then lost and not regained until French reinforcements arrived on the 23rd.

On the whole Battle Zone of the Ulstermen astride the Somme the fighting was very heavy throughout the afternoon, and the enemy eventually succeeded in penetrating the front line between the Tergnier—St. Quentin railway and Contescourt. The defences immediately behind this line held firm throughout the day, as did also those just south of Contescourt ; but that village remained in the enemy's hands, after a local counter-attack at 6.30 p.m. by a company of the 2/R. Irish Rifles had failed, with heavy loss, to regain it. At and about Fontaine les Clercs, just north of the Somme, the enemy was unable to enter the Battle Zone at any point, partly because a large German concentration, observed about 4 p.m. in the valley to the north-east of the village was successfully dealt with by artillery fire. At nightfall, therefore, though a little ground had been lost along the front of the Battle Zone east of the Somme, the valley, unlike most of the others in the front, was still held, and the position of the 36th Division was secure except for the dangerous situation caused by the loss of ground on the Essigny plateau overlooking its right flank.

The re-entrant curve of the Battle Zone held by the 30th Division, lay along a broad ridge with a deepish valley in front and gentle slopes behind. Here the mist cleared soon after noon, and the enemy made even less progress, as his columns could be clearly seen, at first led by mounted officers nearly up to the front-line wire. An attack on the

defences east of Roupy, on the forward edge of the Battle Zone, repulsed by the 2/Green Howards at 1.30 P.M., was renewed later, and desperate fighting followed until a late hour. As a result of this struggle, after repelling a counter-attack made by one company of the 2/Green Howards, between 6 and 6.30 P.M. the enemy at last broke through the front defences and so gained a footing in the village. Local counter-attacks failed to dislodge him, but posts within the village still held on grimly. Between 7.30 and 8 P.M., renewed efforts made in greater strength enabled the Germans to make further progress, but they still failed to overcome the defence of the village keep, which had remained unconquered throughout; in fact, at 1.15 A.M. on the 22nd, some ground was regained by a counter-attack made by the 19/King's (89th Brigade) from the corps reserve, Lieut.-Colonel J. N. Peck who led it falling at the close.

Between Roupy and Savy, where the line was held by the 17/Manchester, and near the latter village, which lay in the valley just outside the Battle Zone, the fighting was equally severe and the defence no less successful; the enemy's gains were limited to obtaining a precarious footing at a few points in the front trench of the Battle Zone, and to the capture, about 3 P.M. of a quarry near Savy. An immediate counter-attack by a company of the 17/Manchester failed to retake the quarry, but subsequently a heavy trench mortar was turned on to it, and in a second counter-attack at 5.45 P.M. by the same company it was recaptured, over thirty prisoners being taken. In and east of Savy by about two o'clock the Germans had congregated in large numbers; but, subjected to very heavy trench-mortar fire, about 3.30 P.M. their ranks began a temporary rearward movement. A little earlier, about 2.40 P.M., German troops, including field artillery, had been observed massing behind Savy Wood, higher up the valley,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles north-east of Savy,<sup>1</sup> and at 3.55 P.M. five waves of attack were seen advancing from that direction towards Savy. Nevertheless against this and all other attacks, although supported by heavy artillery fire and low-flying aeroplanes, the defence was so successful that it proved unnecessary to send up reinforcements. Towards the end of the day, the front defences were penetrated at several points to the west and north of Savy, but no real impression had been made

<sup>1</sup> A redoubt in the Forward Zone about five hundred yards north of Savy was still holding out at that time, and continued to do so till about 6 P.M.

on the Battle Zone when the fighting died down between 9 and 10 P.M.

On the 61st Division front, once the mist had cleared, the enemy was effectively held by fire from the Battle Zone positions on the Holnon plateau. There, on a wide flat expanse still covered with the trees of Holnon Wood, he did not succeed in closing with the defenders at any point except on the extreme left. To this result contributed in large measure the very gallant defence of Enghien Redoubt, in the Forward Zone, by the 2/4th Oxfordshire and Bucks. L.I., which, as before mentioned, held on until 4.30 P.M. Even then the remnants of the garrison—as it was still able to communicate with superior authority by a buried cable—refused to withdraw until permission had been obtained from brigade headquarters. It was then too late, for none of the Oxfordshire succeeded in cutting their way out.

The left flank of the division had been drawn back, as already noted, in consequence of the penetration made about noon into the Omignon valley, and a line of defence had been taken up, facing north, extending from about twelve hundred yards south of Maissemy to some five hundred yards south-east of Villecholles.<sup>1</sup> The capture of the spurs south of the above two villages was regarded as of great importance by the Germans, since it would have eased their position in the Omignon valley, where, being much crowded, they were suffering heavily now that the mist had cleared. Such a success would also have opened the way to a further turning movement round the defences on the Holnon plateau, which, like Le Verguier dominated the surrounding ground. Consequently desperate and long-continued efforts were made by the enemy throughout the afternoon and evening to drive in this flank, which was held by the 1/8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. The end of the spur south-east of Villecholles was attacked several times from the Omignon valley, during which Lieut.-Colonel Macalpine-Downie was killed. Repeated assaults were also delivered against the position of the flank south of Maissemy from both the north and the east, supported by very heavy artillery fire, so that the garrison was very hard beset during the afternoon. At 4.30 P.M. a counter-attack to relieve the pressure was made by the 2/4th R. Berkshire (184th Brigade, but lent to the 183rd), advancing northwards up the valley. This effort failed to push the

<sup>1</sup> A mill stood near the last-named point, and, in consequence, the position was known as "Mill Hill".

enemy back,<sup>1</sup> and its defeat was followed up by another desperate German assault on the hill, made about 5.30 P.M. This was repulsed ; it proved to be the enemy's last effort for the day, so that when night fell, the flank of the 61st Division was still intact.

### *XIX. Corps*

The line held by the 24th Division at 2 P.M., from the east of Villecholles to beyond Le Verguier, also stood firm against all attacks until after darkness had fallen. Then, at last, after a fine defence, Cookers' Quarry, north-east of Vadencourt, held by a company of the 8/Rifle Brigade, where the fighting had been very severe, was captured about 8 P.M.. Orders to withdraw towards the Vadencourt defences had been issued at 6.30 P.M., but had not reached the garrison. The stubborn resistance offered in this important position, which commanded the Vadencourt—Bellenglise road, held up considerable forces of the enemy all day, and so contributed much to slow down his progress in this part of the field.<sup>2</sup> The quarry lost, Vadencourt (8/R. West Kent) was evacuated, a rear guard holding it until the movement was completed, and a new line of defence was taken up about one thousand yards behind that village, running thence northwards to Le Verguier. Up to 3 P.M. all enemy efforts to approach Le Verguier—held by the 8/Queen's and the 24th Machine Gun Battalion, under Lieut.-Colonel H. J. C. Peirs—had failed, as the field batteries which attempted to come into action at 1,200 yards' range were silenced. The Germans therefore dug themselves in half a mile to the east of the village and endeavoured to turn its defences by attacks against the line to the north and south. To the north, at first they gained no ground, although, about 8 P.M. in a dusk attack, they succeeded in capturing a post six hundred yards from the village ; but to the south, about 6 P.M., they made an advance of three hundred yards and reached the defences on the outskirts of the village itself. Le Verguier, which

<sup>1</sup> The commanding officer, Lieut.-Colonel J. H. S. Dimmer, V.C., was killed, as, mounted, he was leading up two companies to join the third, some quarter of a mile ahead, and already in position. If the counter-attack had succeeded, the intention of the XIX. Corps was to make an effort to recapture Maissemy.

<sup>2</sup> The long defence of Cookers' Quarry prevented the enemy from pushing guns up the Vadencourt—Bellenglise road. About 3.30 P.M. the road could be seen crowded with enemy troops, guns and transport unable to advance until the quarry was captured.

stands on the highest ground on this part of the battlefield, was thus surrounded on three sides.

On the remainder of the corps front, from Le Verguier to the Cologne valley (66th Division), the defenders (the 2/7th, 2/6th and 9/Manchester, 2/5th East Lancashire and 2/7th Lancashire Fusiliers, a company of the 1/Royal Fusiliers and the 104th Field Company R.E.) lost but little ground after 2 P.M. Meantime the Green Line was being organized by Br.-General G. C. Williams (199th Brigade, who had until 17th March been C.R.E. of the division) with any men on whom he could lay hands. The 2/6th Manchester, which had previously been driven back from the front line by liquid fire, managed to cling on to Carpeza Copse, about the centre of the zone; but the struggle continued to be severe, with very heavy enemy machine-gun fire all through the afternoon and evening.

The headquarters and company of the 2/7th Manchester in Brosse Wood, supported by the close range fire of B/330th Battery R.F.A., continued to beat off attacks until 6 P.M., when they were at last surrounded and the few survivors captured. The line of defence behind the wood and thence by Carpeza Copse to Trinket Post, where many attacks were repulsed, was, however, held. In front of this line the attack eventually died down for the night, but only after severe fighting had taken place in the Battle Zone to the east around various posts which had held out well into the afternoon.

At Templeux le Guérard, too, though the defenders were exposed to enfilade fire from the north, as well as to frontal attacks, the enemy met with fierce resistance after 2 P.M., the defenders making excellent shooting. But, after dark,<sup>1</sup> by means of trench-mortar fire which completely destroyed the defences, although for a long time the British trench mortars gave as good as they got, the Germans obtained possession of the village except for one Lewis-gun post, 60 out of the original 450 of the 1/5th Border Regiment (Pioneers) being captured. The enemy advance was then stayed by the defences immediately to the west.

### *VII. Corps*

The rearward movement by the right of the VII. Corps to the west of Ronssoy, already in progress at 2 P.M., was continued, but not without strenuous efforts on the part of

Map 3.

Sketch

14.

<sup>1</sup> About 5.30 P.M., according to "Regt. No. 31".

the 16th Division to delay the enemy's advance. These efforts were so far successful that it was 4 P.M. before the defence was pressed back to the last line of the Battle Zone, from the west of Templeux le Guérard to Ste. Emilie. Ste. Emilie itself was for a time in enemy hands; the howitzer battery of the XCIV. Brigade R.F.A. had to be abandoned,<sup>1</sup> and two heavy guns on railway mountings, the track having broken, were lost. The village was, in course of time, recaptured; and then on the rear line of the Battle Zone, where the 47th Brigade, the reserve brigade of the 16th Division, with the 11/Hampshire (Pioneers), had been deployed, a fresh and successful stand was made until nightfall, the artillery of the 16th Division being reinforced by that of the 39th Division, which arrived during the evening.

Between Ste. Emilie and Epéhy, still held in the front line of the Battle Zone, a dangerous situation had unfortunately been caused by the retirement from Lempire—Ronssoy, the enemy gaining the line of the road Ste. Emilie—Epéhy about 2 P.M. The troops opposing this advance, their right being completely open, were pressed back, though slowly and fighting all the way, to the rear of the Battle Zone, where the remnants of the 2/R. Munster Fusiliers,<sup>2</sup> on the extreme left of the division, joined the 21st Division in the defence of Epéhy. Thus, a gap was gradually opened in the line. To guard against penetration at this point, the 110th Brigade, on the right of the 21st Division, threw back a defensive flank from Epéhy towards Ste. Emilie; but it had few troops (mostly of the 6/Leicester-shire) available for this purpose, and touch between the 16th and 21st Divisions was lost for some time. The enemy, however, neglected to turn the situation to account, except to work down behind the Munster Fusiliers, and the gap was eventually closed by the arrival of the 116th Brigade (39th Division) in the evening.

On the 21st Division front, Epéhy—Pezière was held throughout the day, the enemy completely failing to make any impression on the defences, with the exception of a small lodgment made about 9.40 P.M. in the south-eastern part of Epéhy. In the centre of the division, also,

<sup>1</sup> A single gun, placed to enfilade the 21st Division front, fired nearly a thousand rounds, and when ammunition was exhausted the officer in charge kept the enemy off with a machine gun until a team arrived, and the gun was got away.

<sup>2</sup> One company, however, in a copse called Tétard Wood, though nearly surrounded, held on to 5 P.M., when the survivors fell back.

advance into the Heudicourt valley, checked about 2 P.M., made practically no further progress, despite repeated efforts during the rest of the afternoon. A counter-attack made in the evening towards 8 P.M. by the 15/Durham L.I. (64th Brigade), when Lieut.-Colonel H. W. Festing was killed, even retook a strongpoint west of Vauzelette Farm with a considerable part of the lost ground, and thus restored the situation. Chapel Crossing, on the left of the division, was not captured during the day, nor was Chapel Hill (1st and 2/Lincolnshire), though further reports to the contrary reached the 9th Division in the afternoon about 4.45 P.M. and again later in the evening.<sup>1</sup> These reports, emanating from patrols, caused renewed anxiety to the South African Brigade as to the security of its right flank, and steps were again most justifiably taken by that brigade by directing the 4th Battalion (South African Scottish) to clear up the situation on that side, as the capture of the hill would place the enemy in a position to reach the rear of the South African line. The company sent for the purpose drove away any Germans who were encountered, and thus during the evening the hill was held by troops belonging to the right of the 9th Division as well as to the left of the 21st. North of Chapel Hill the enemy had not succeeded in making any substantial progress since the capture of Gauche Wood.

Thus, as a whole, except for the three breaches, near Essigny, entailing the retirement of the III. Corps, in the valley of the Omignon, and in that of the Cologne, the Battle Zone was still stoutly held.

#### FIFTH ARMY ORDERS FOR THE REORGANIZATION OF THE LINE DURING THE NIGHT

About 1 P.M., while the battle was developing, General Maps Humbert<sup>2</sup> had called on Sir Hubert Gough and had informed him that, so far, no troops had been placed at Sketch 14.

<sup>1</sup> The "hill" is a very gently sloping knoll and not well defined. There was certainly penetration south of it, where British and German parties were intermixed. It seems possible that enemy patrols did get on to the hill from time to time, as the defences, consisting of strongpoints, were not a continuous line.

The history of the German 27th Division states that the 107th Division on its right made no progress in the sector in question; in fact, "gained nothing at all".

<sup>2</sup> See page 101. General Humbert had been appointed by the French Commander-in-Chief to command any troops that might be detailed to operate on the British front; and he had, for some time, been at Clermont, with a Staff, in readiness for such an eventuality.

his disposal by General Pétain for co-operation with the British, making the historic remark, "Je n'ai qu'un fanion," in reference to the Army pennant on his motor car : he was, therefore, powerless at present to assist the Fifth Army. It appeared that the French Commander-in-Chief was as yet in doubt as to whether or not the attack on the British was designed to draw attention from a greater effort to be made on his own front, against which he averred that the enemy continued to be very active and on which a heavy bombardment was also proceeding.<sup>1</sup>

From British sources, General Gough could have no hope of any immediate help beyond the two divisions in G.H.Q. reserve, the 20th and the 39th, then behind his front, which he had already ordered forward, pending authorization. The Third Army, he had heard, had been attacked north of the Flesquières Salient simultaneously with the Fifth, and was also heavily engaged. Behind the First and Second Armies there were only four divisions in G.H.Q. reserve and, though all possible preparations had been made, the transport of divisions from the north would take a considerable time.

Meanwhile all information from the front showed that the enemy was pressing his attacks with the utmost vigour and in greatly superior force, while reports from aircraft stated that more troops were coming up. Before visiting his corps commanders in the afternoon, General Gough had informed his Staff that, though he considered the front could be held possibly for two or three days, it must then be broken unless he should receive more reinforcements than he could expect within that time : to all appearance, the situation was developing as foreshadowed in the instruction issued by G.H.Q. on the 9th February, and the Army must fall

<sup>1</sup> F.O.A. vi. (i.), pp. 236 states :

"In the afternoon, General Pétain considered that we should soon have to intervene in favour of our Allies in accordance with one of the plans prepared during the winter precisely in view of the eventuality which had now occurred. At 4.45 P.M. he notified General Franchet d'Esperey not to proceed with the relief of the XXXV. Corps by the XXXVI. on the front of the Sixth Army, as arranged. Finally, in the evening, on receipt of information reporting the delicate situation of the British Fifth Army in the region between the Oise and St. Quentin, and, before having received a request of any kind from Field-Marshal Haig, the General Commanding-in-Chief took measures so that he would be able to put in movement at the shortest notice the troops long since ear-marked to operate in the British zone". At 11.55 P.M. he ordered the 9th and 10th Divisions, and the 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division, with other units of the V. Corps to be ready to embus and entrain at any time after midday on the 22nd.

back fighting in order to maintain a continuous front, using every means of delaying the enemy's advance : put in the simplest language, the Army would make the best fight it could by day without getting overwhelmed, and then slip back at night to a new selected line, the engineers destroying bridges and roads ; it would repeat the process day after day until reinforcements arrived.

After General Gough's return from his visits about 5.30 P.M. news came from the Third Army that the Germans had driven a wedge into the IV. Corps (Third Army) front, north of the Flesquières Salient, and were already across the Bapaume—Cambrai road in the Forward and Battle Zones, a very serious threat to the V. Corps in the salient—and to the VII. Corps south of it—and that General Byng had ordered a withdrawal of the V. Corps to the Battle Zone. This was good news, but General Gough decided nevertheless to carry out a limited measure of withdrawal during the night, and issued preliminary verbal orders to that effect. Whilst these were being put into writing, he spoke on the telephone to General Lawrence, the Chief of the General Staff at G.H.Q., and told him of the general situation : of the new divisions brought up by the Germans and the masses still in rear, the loss of the Forward Zone and the holding of the Battle Zone except for the three breaches. He expressed his fears for the next day and doubts whether the tired and weakened troops could continue the struggle without support. The C.G.S. endeavoured to allay General Gough's evident great anxiety, and informed him that the Commander-in-Chief acquiesced in the nature of his orders. They were therefore issued in writing at 9.45 P.M. Briefly, these orders named the new German divisions brought up by their numbers (two against the III. Corps, eight against the XVIII., six against the XIX. and none against the VII.—there were actually three), and formally directed the III. Corps to fall back to a line behind the Crozat canal ; the XVIII. Corps to bend back its right behind the Somme, so as to keep connection with the III. Corps ; the XIX. Corps to bend back its left from Le Verguier, to keep connection with the VII. ; and the latter to take similar action on its left to maintain connection with the right of the Third Army on the front of the Battle Zone. They announced the withdrawal of Army headquarters to Villers Bretonneux, and ordered the move of the four corps headquarters to Guiscard, Nesle, Villers Carbonnel and Cléry, respectively.

At 11 p.m. the Fifth Army, in its situation report to G.H.Q., using map reference letters and figures, defined the Army front line north of the Oise in and about the Battle Zone as it was at nightfall, with as much accuracy as could be expected. It was apparently traced by joining up the localities in the Battle Zone thought to be in British possession and excluding those known to be in the enemy's. It showed in the III. Corps, on the right, the rear line of the zone ; in the centre the front line ; on the left the rear line (but with Essigny still held) ; in the XVIII. Corps, a wide, shallow strip bitten out of the right front (astride the Somme) and a small piece out of the left (Maissemy) ; in the XIX., on the right, about half the depth of the zone lost (Maissemy), the centre holding fast (Le Verguier), and more than half the zone lost on the left (Templeux le Guérard) ; in the VII., on the right the Lempire salient and half the zone lost (Templeux le Guérard), the centre (Epéhy) and left held.

From this report, which was misleading in so far as it showed the line to be continuous, it was plain that the enemy had made progress against the weak right wing and at the junctions of the corps astride the valleys, and it was at these places that support was required by the Fifth Army.

General Gough's report was communicated to the Third Army, where it gave the impression that the Fifth Army stood in a better situation to continue the fight than was actually the case, and induced General Byng to delay the evacuation of the Flesquières Salient.

#### THE RETIREMENT OF THE RIGHT TO THE CROZAT CANAL AND REORGANIZATION OF THE LINE

##### *III. Corps*

**Map 2.** Lieut.-General Butler had foreseen before General Sketch 14. Gough's visit that it might become necessary to withdraw across the canal at night. During the day, therefore, he had made such preparations as lay in his power for the smooth execution of the movement, and had already ordered all heavy guns, except 6-inch and 8-inch howitzers, to be withdrawn behind the canal.<sup>1</sup> So far he had only

<sup>1</sup> Other corps moved back at least some of their heavy batteries during the night of the 21st/22nd to their rear positions ; a few could not be shifted, either because they had been damaged by enemy fire or because their transport had been destroyed.

employed the minimum number of reserves necessary to maintain the fight, and had kept back the remainder behind the canal to construct defences and to complete all preparations for the demolition of the bridges. Before finally deciding to withdraw, he discussed the possibility of regaining Essigny by a counter-attack with the commander of the XVIII. Corps, but they were in agreement that such an operation could not be undertaken with any hope of success.

The Crozat canal was a considerable obstacle, the breadth of the water being thirty to forty feet, and it was unfordable. Much of the country to the west was wooded and afforded cover from view, whilst to the east it was mostly open. In every way, it afforded a good temporary line of defence. Apart from the main object of stemming the German onrush, it was vital that the canal line, a connecting link in the defence at the junction with the French, should be held sufficiently long to enable the French reinforcements, for the arrival of which arrangements had been made, to come up and deploy without any fear of being disturbed by the Germans. Sufficient labour had not been available before the battle to create a strong line of defence behind the canal, although nominally it formed part of the Green Line. Little more had been done than to spitlock some trenches and erect at passages less than three thousand yards of slight wire entanglement in three blocks.<sup>1</sup> Except at the small bridgeheads, no defence of the eastern bank by infantry on the reverse slopes, with guns on the western bank, seems to have been contemplated.

The corps orders for the retirement were issued at 7.25 P.M., and the initial movements begun about 9 P.M., the 3rd Hussars and Oxfordshire Hussars (4th Dismounted Brigade) being pushed forward to assist in covering them. The night was quiet and a white mist soon began to form ; but as the routes had been selected days before, there was no hitch of any kind : the various echelons retired in turn until only a thin screen of troops remained, and this withdrew after a suitable interval. The change to their new positions of a large number of field batteries not trained for open warfare, which, in addition, had suffered considerable losses of officers, N.C.O.'s and teams, certainly proved

<sup>1</sup> The trench lines turned out to be none too well sited, and the troops occupied better tactical positions ; they served a useful purpose, however, for the German bombardment was directed on them, and our men, in consequence, largely escaped casualties.

difficult in the darkness and obscurity. The infantry in many cases lent assistance in man-handling the guns out of their positions to places to which the reduced teams could be brought. The enemy made no attempt to interfere with the withdrawal—only on the extreme left were any Germans seen by the rear guards—and it was completed before daylight, the troops being in their new positions about 6 A.M. They were then distributed, generally, as stated below, the dismounted cavalry, which earlier had been divided to defend the bridges, being intermixed with the newly arrived infantry, and the 3rd Dismounted Division (6th, 7th and Canadian Brigades) having been moved up to near Beaumont en Beine (5 miles S.S.W. of Jussy) :—

South of Oise :

Two brigades of the 58th Division (less a battalion).

Oise to Crozat canal  
(defensive flank) :

Small detachments from various units, including a squadron Oxfordshire Hussars, and later in the day details from the Divisional Signal School.

Tergnier—Quessy (inclusive) :

58th Division (less 5 battalions) :  
Front line : 8/London (from south of Oise).

In support : A mixed party of 2/2nd, 3rd and 2/4th London, 1/4th Suffolk (Pioneers), 182nd Tunneling Co. and 503rd Field Co. R.E.

In reserve : 6th Dismounted Brigade, 58th Division Engineers, 18th Entrenching Battalion.

Corps reserve : 14th Entrenching Battalion.

18th Division (less 54th Brigade) :

Front line : 4th Hussars (3rd Dismounted Brigade), 12th Entrenching Battalion.

In support : 4th Dismounted Brigade, 55th Brigade, 80th and 92nd Field Cos. R.E.

In reserve : 8/R. Sussex (Pioneers); 53rd Brigade; Reinforcement Camp Details.

Quessy (exclusive) to  
Mennessis (inclusive) :

Corps reserve : 3rd Dismounted Division (less 6th Dismounted Brigade).

Mennesis (exclusive)  
to 2,500 yards north-  
west of Jussy :

14th Division (plus 54th Bri-  
gade) :

Front line and support : 5th and  
16th Lancers (3rd Dismounted  
Brigade), 54th Brigade, 41st and  
43rd Brigades.

In reserve : 5th Dismounted  
Brigade ; 42nd Brigade ; 14th  
Division Engineers, 11/King's  
(Pioneers), 13th Entrenching Bat-  
talion.

After the withdrawal of the troops across the canal, the demolition charges in the road bridges were fired by the R.E. detachments standing by for the purpose, and the bridges were destroyed before 2 A.M. on the 22nd. Subsequently, before 9 A.M. two out of the three railway bridges, for which the French railway engineers were responsible, were demolished by the engineers of the 14th Division, but the largest, east of Jussy, from lack of sufficient explosive, remained fit for the passage of infantry and light traffic.<sup>1</sup> It has sometimes been asserted that the failure to destroy the bridges effectively deprived the infantry of any value which the canal possessed as an obstacle, and allowed the enemy to cross. The demolition of a bridge by explosion does not blow the materials of which it is built into dust and leave nothing behind but a yawning gap ; it generally does no more than render the bridge useless for vehicles and formed troops ; infantry posts are always required to prevent the enemy from making use of the débris, of which, as a rule, sufficient remains in place to enable active and determined men to cross singly.<sup>2</sup>

### XVIII. Corps

The dispositions to be made by the XVIII. Corps to conform to the withdrawal of the III. Corps to the Crozat canal line had been discussed by the Army commander with Lieut.-General Maxse during his afternoon visit. It

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 22.

<sup>2</sup> The latest French regulations (1934) lay down that the demolition of bridges must, as a rule, be completed by artillery fire and air bombing.

had been decided that the 36th Division (now only two brigades strong, the equivalent of one having been lost in the Forward Zone) and various artillery units should be drawn back behind the Somme, the remainder of the corps, assisted by the 20th Division released from G.H.Q. reserve, retaining its positions. Although orders did not reach brigades until 8 P.M., the withdrawal of the 36th Division was carried out, without interference from the enemy, between 10.30 P.M. and 4.15 A.M. on the 22nd : the last attack from Contescourt had been repelled by the 2/R. Irish Rifles about 9 P.M. The new front occupied by the division extended for four miles immediately behind the Somme canal, from about two miles north of its junction with the Crozat canal to a little short of Fontaine les Clercs, in the front of the Battle Zone, and then along that front to near Roupy. The two-mile gap between the right of the 36th Division and the left of the 14th was filled by the 61st Brigade, 20th Division, which had been sent forward to hold a bridgehead round St. Simon during the retirement, and had afterwards been drawn back behind the Somme. Here also the bridges over the Somme and its canal—75 in all including the extemporized structures—had been destroyed after all the troops, except three platoons, were across ; but the enemy was close on their heels, so that several bridges had to be destroyed under fire.<sup>1</sup> In all cases, the damage done exceeded expectation, although owing to lack of explosives only gaps had been made and the abutments remained standing.

The rest of the XVIII. Corps maintained its positions in the Battle Zone, from Roupy to the spur about twelve hundred yards south of Maissemy, where a flank was turned back along the Omignon valley, as already stated.

The front was strengthened during the night, not only by the 20th Division, but by the 89th Brigade (30th Divi-

<sup>1</sup> The bridges near Seraucourt were blown up by order of the 107th Brigade, but this had no sooner been done than the 108th Brigade sent word that it wanted to make use of them. Fortunately one of the R.E. officers on the spot was able to guide the 108th to another crossing place, but three of its rear-guard platoons were cut off.

At Tugny, on the right flank of the 36th Division, the Germans were actually on the steel-girder bridge when the time-fuse failed. 2/Lieut. C. L. Knox of the 150th Field Company R.E., who was in charge, tore away the useless time-fuse, clambered under the bridge and lit the instantaneous fuse (which is the immediate connection with a charge). Death appeared to be certain if the charge detonated, and it did so, the bridge being destroyed ; but, by a miracle, 2nd Lieut. Knox was uninjured. He received the V.C.

sion), held in corps reserve during the previous day. Of this brigade, one battalion remained at Roupy, where it had counter-attacked; another was placed at Vaux, in support of the left of the 30th Division and the third was posted near Attilly, in support of the 61st Division. The 20th Division (less the 61st Brigade filling the gap between the 14th and 36th Divisions) was placed in and near the Green Line between the Somme canal and the Omignon, with its artillery in action divided between the 36th and 30th Divisions.

### *XIX. Corps*

The XIX. Corps remained in the line held at the close of the day, its front running from about midway between Villecholles and Maissemy along the rear defences of the Battle Zone to about one thousand yards west of Vadencourt; thence it followed a switch line running due north, but with a gap from a point about seven hundred yards south of Le Verguier to the defences of that village. Northwards of Le Verguier the line passed west of Brosse Wood and east of Carpeza Copse to Trinity and Trinket Posts, which were still held. From these redoubts the direction of the line was north-westerly, passing just west of Templeux le Guérard to the boundary line in the Cologne valley.

With the exception of the 9th Cavalry Brigade at Herilly and Roisel, practically the entire small corps reserve had been absorbed: the 1st Cavalry Brigade on the 24th Division front, the 2nd Cavalry Brigade on the 66th Division front, and the 73rd Brigade (24th Division) in the redoubts in and along the rear of the Battle Zone.<sup>1</sup> The 50th Division, from Army reserve, had, however, been placed at the disposal of the corps at 3.20 P.M. and moving by rail to Brie (11 miles west of Maissemy) during the night, had come into position in the Green Line from near the Omignon valley to the Cologne valley by 8 A.M., on the 22nd March.<sup>2</sup> The corps commander had also still in hand two entrenching battalions (the 15th in the Green Line, the 19th marching to Vermand—2 miles south-west of Maissemy—where it arrived at 1.45 P.M. on the 22nd), and a battalion of tanks placed at his disposal at 10.15 P.M. on

<sup>1</sup> The VII. and XVII. Bdes. R.H.A of the 1st Cavalry Division had also been allotted to the divisions holding the line, and had been brought into action during the 21st, except one battery held in reserve.

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately it was without machine guns or transport and tools, which had been sent by road when the division was moved up by rail to Lucheux.

the 21st and posted at Nobescourt Farm (4 miles west of Le Verguier).

### VII. Corps

**Map 3.** Sketch 14. The 16th Division had been so roughly handled during the 21st March that it had only one brigade<sup>1</sup> fit to remain in the line. Moreover, its losses in artillery had been very heavy.<sup>2</sup> Reinforcements had, however, been made available, and it was decided to maintain the line held at the close of the day's fighting. The remnants of the 48th and 49th Brigades which had suffered so heavily were withdrawn during the night to reorganize, their place being taken by the 47th Brigade, the 11/Hampshire (Pioneers), the 156th Field Company R.E. and the 116th Brigade (less the 11/R. Sussex) of the 39th Division. The rear line of the Battle Zone was held, from about half a mile west of Templeux le Guérard to Ste. Emilie (inclusive) and thence round the railway station to where the Ste. Emilie—Epéhy road crosses the more westerly of the two railways. The 116th Brigade was on the left of this line and was in touch, near the railway crossing, with the right of the 21st Division, which had brought up the 97th and 126th Field Companies R.E. during the night to form a defensive flank in order to maintain connection. The 11/R. Sussex, sent from support to the right of the line at 8 P.M., was, however, unable to find any British troops to the southward, where it had been instructed to get touch, for the line of the 66th Division was some half a mile to the front ; it therefore formed a defensive flank. Behind the line, the 39th Division (less the 116th Brigade, and its divisional artillery which during the evening had come into action) partially dug and occupied a switch line connecting the Green Line at the Bois de Tincourt (a mile north of the Cologne Valley) with the rear line of the Battle Zone, nearly due north of the Bois, at Saulcourt.<sup>3</sup> Twelve tanks of the

<sup>1</sup> The 47th, which had originally been held in corps reserve.

<sup>2</sup> The front had been covered by the divisional 177th and 180th Brigades R.F.A. and two attached Army brigades, the 189th and 277th. Of these, the 177th and 180th lost all but 4 howitzers, but the others were short of only 6 guns.

<sup>3</sup> Orders to dig this switch line were received by the two brigades and the machine-gun companies at 4 P.M. and 5 P.M., respectively. The line had to be taped, and tools and R.E. material brought up. Fog and darkness hampering operations, it was midnight before the last battalion was guided to its place. By dawn a very good chain of posts had been formed, with some wire in front put up by the 227th and half the 234th Field Company R.E. and the 13/Gloucestershire (Pioneers).

4th Tank Battalion were allotted to assist in the defence of this switch line, and six of these were posted at Villers Faucon under the 116th Brigade. From south of the Bois de Tincourt to Hamel, the Green Line was occupied by the 17th Entrenching Battalion, 1½ field companies R.E. and the corps cyclists.

The 21st Division was still firmly established in Epéhy—Pezière. From the north of the latter village the line bent back westwards for about half a mile, connecting with the intermediate defence line of the Battle Zone along which, with British and Germans somewhat mixed together, each holding portions of the line, the front was continued northwards to Chapel Hill. This general front it was decided to hold during the next day; but as the 21st Division had been obliged to extend its right considerably in maintaining touch with the 16th, the 9th Division was ordered to take over Chapel Hill. This was complied with during the night by the South African Brigade (reinforced by the 11/R. Scots from the divisional reserve), the relief being completed and a refused right flank entrenched by 8 A.M. on the 22nd. The 21st Division front was reinforced by the 15/Durham L.I. (64th Brigade), which had counter-attacked in the evening, the 14/Northumberland Fusiliers (Pioneers) being brought up to replace the battalion in the rear line of the Battle Zone, south-east of Heudicourt.

On the defences of the 9th Division the enemy had made no impression whatever during the 21st, with the sole exception of the capture of Gauche Wood in the Forward Zone. At 8 P.M., however, the division was notified that the V. Corps would evacuate the Flesquières Salient during the night, falling back to a position in the Battle Zone behind it.<sup>1</sup> The 9th Division, having been ordered to conform to this movement, withdrew from its Forward Zone during the night, but it held the rear line of that zone until 5 A.M. The enemy did not interfere with the movement, remaining inactive except for some gas shelling of the Green Line area near the junction of the Fifth and Third Armies.

Owing to the swiftness with which the military situation changed and the poor visibility which prevailed until well after 1 P.M., little information was received until the afternoon from airmen, although numerous flights were made; even then air fighting along the Fifth Army front was confused and attacks by bombing and machine-gun fire

<sup>1</sup> See page 207.

from the air were occasional and spasmodic. In accordance with the accepted plan, attempts were made in the afternoon to interrupt German railway traffic, and the junctions at Le Cateau, Busigny and Wassigny were bombed with success. The bridges over the St. Quentin canal were attacked at 2.30 P.M. and 6 P.M. and a total of two hundred 25 lbs. bombs were dropped ; although none of the bridges were hit, enemy troops and transport in the vicinity suffered.

Under the conditions prevailing on the night of the 21st March, it was impossible for most units to prepare any reliable statement of their casualties. All ranks were tired after a very long day of fighting and a night of movement ; the need, too, for reorganization, relief of exhausted troops, and improvement of new defences claimed first attention. In the stress of the battle it had often been impossible to keep battalions and companies from getting intermixed. Many of the men reported "missing", especially those of the garrisons of the Forward Zone, returned at the end of the retreat, having joined temporarily any unit they could find. Heavy casualties in officers and non-commissioned officers added to the difficulties ; while preparation for the renewal of the battle next morning allowed little time for clerical work. In many cases, therefore, no reliable casualty returns were rendered until a later date, and then they covered a period of several days ; so that only a very general statement of casualties is possible.

Of the battalions posted in the Forward Zone, many had entirely ceased to exist as units, whilst in the majority of the others, only few officers and men remained. In the Battle Zone, except on the Holnon plateau—and even there the bombardment had caused casualties—the losses had been severe, the 173rd Brigade and the 14th and 16th Divisions having little further fighting strength left.<sup>1</sup>

The losses in guns, too, had been heavy<sup>2</sup>; all the anti-

<sup>1</sup> The fact that these divisions—and others in due course which were similarly battered—were henceforward divisions only in name, will, in order to avoid the frequent repetition of the words "the remnants of the division", be indicated by abbreviating "division" to "divn". Similarly, some "brigades" will become "bdes".

		Field.	Heavy.
III. Corps .	.	94	12
XVIII. Corps .	:	85	88
XIX. Corps .	:	59	14
VII. Corps .	:	55	25
		<hr/>	<hr/>
		293	89

tank forward guns had been lost in the bombardment ; many batteries had been overrun in the fog between the Forward and Battle Zones ; while in the sectors of the latter where the enemy had penetrated to any depth, guns had been lost owing to teams having failed to reach them in time or having been shot down in the attempt.

There is general agreement however, that, notwithstanding such losses, the mental strain of the terrific bombardment, and the physical strain of a long day's fighting, the Fifth Army remained unbroken in spirit. All ranks felt that they had made a good fight under very adverse conditions, and could hold the enemy when he attacked frontally and they could see him. Once the fog lifted very heavy toll had been taken of the masses of German troops, which from points of vantage could plainly be seen pouring into action, a wonderful target which could not be missed. Heavy casualties had continued to be inflicted ; for the German tide continued to flow till nightfall. Stragglers from the Forward Zone had joined any battalion or party which they had found offering resistance, in order not to miss such opportunities for shooting. One C.R.E. who collected 700 such stragglers reported that they were ready to fight anywhere and under anyone. Artillery-men who had been forced to abandon their guns took up rifles ; engineers and pioneers viewed the prospect of fighting all day and all night as a welcome change from digging. The Army might yield ground, but it was, and remained, undefeated.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See also Note II., "The Germans on the 21st March" at end of Chapter X.

## CHAPTER X

### THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

21ST MARCH 1918 (*concluded*)

#### THIRD ARMY

(Map 3 ; Sketches 4, 6, 14)

Map 3. It has been explained that in the enemy plan of battle there Sketch 14. was no intention of assaulting the Flesquières Salient, held by the V. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir E. A. Fanshawe). The salient would be "pinched out" by attacks on either side, and on the north, the great German offensive was to be limited by the river Scarpe. Thus the whole weight of the infantry attack directed against the Third Army (General Hon. Sir J. H. Byng) fell on the IV. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir G. M. Harper),<sup>1</sup> holding just over six miles, and the VI. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir J. A. L. Haldane), holding just under six miles. It was made by the German *Seventeenth Army* (General Otto von Below), the front of which extended from Flesquières to Arleux (5 miles south of Lens). On the remaining sixteen miles of the Third Army front, the enemy's immediate object was restricted to holding the British to their ground and his action was therefore confined to artillery fire, combined with local infantry operations. The bombardment, however, was spread over the whole of the Third Army front and part of that of the First Army, on its left ; it was of the same character as that which struck the Fifth Army, except that mustard gas was fired into the Flesquières Salient.

The action on the parts of the Third Army front subject only to holding attacks will first be described.

Against the V. Corps, which, in view of its dangerous

<sup>1</sup> Lieut.-General Harper (killed in a motor accident in 1923 when General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Southern Command), had taken command of the IV. Corps only on 11th March, having previously commanded the 51st (Highland) Division.

position in the salient and its weak junction with the VII. Corps (Fifth Army), had organized defensive flanks for self-protection, a series of local infantry attacks, now known to have been raids on a considerable scale, began at an early hour.<sup>1</sup> After heavy trench-mortar bombardment, which obliterated the front trenches, three attacks were made in succession, at 5.30 A.M., 9.30 A.M. and 10.15 A.M., against the right and centre of the 63rd (Royal Naval) Division (Major-General C. E. Lawrie), against the left and left centre of the 47th Division (Major-General Sir G. F. Gorringe), and the left of the 17th Division (Major-General P. R. Robertson). The Germans succeeded in entering the front line; but they were either bombed or driven by counter-attacks out of part of their gains on each occasion, and were prevented from widening the gaps they had made or from penetrating more deeply into the position.

Other attacks were made later in the morning, when the fog had cleared off; but, although the dust and smoke of battle still obscured the view, they were all repelled. In these feints the enemy exposed himself freely, forgetting perhaps that the fog no longer screened his movements, and, as the British artillery and machine-gun fire was excellent, he suffered very heavily.

Danger seemed to threaten from the northward rather than from the front; for it had been observed that no bombardment fell on the Bapaume—Cambrai road, from which it was inferred that the enemy hoped to use it later on. In any case, although the garrison of the Flesquières Salient suffered very heavily from mustard gas, there were few casualties otherwise, and all the batteries managed to maintain their fire on barrage lines practically throughout the day. General Byng, who visited Lieut.-General Fanshawe during the afternoon, was able to reassure himself that the re-establishment of the situation in the Salient was not beyond the powers of the garrison. By evening the enemy's fire diminished, and the troops of the V. Corps, ignorant of the general situation, and having maintained their position, were much pleased with the results of the day's fighting.

<sup>1</sup> Around the Salient were the 21st Reserve and 16th Reserve Divisions (*XXXIX. Reserve Corps, Second Army*) and the 53rd Reserve Division (*XI. Corps, Seventeenth Army*), without any reserves. Rupprecht, ii. p. 347.

The orders to the 53rd Reserve Division, charged with the protection of the left flank of the main assault, were to pin down the opposing troops by raids until they were turned by the advance further west and began to retreat; then to move on to Havrincourt.

On the front of the XVII. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir Charles Fergusson), on the extreme left of the Third Army line, there was no infantry action. After the initial bombardment, which included the front of the XIII. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir B. de Lisle) in the First Army, on the left of the XVII. Corps, enemy "harassing" fire of varying intensity was maintained with a great deal of gas, first from projectors, but later from field-guns, which caused no more than mild discomfort, and in most cases hardly made it necessary to put on gas masks. Reply was made by "counter-preparation" fire and later by "harassing" fire. Here, too, the troops were well satisfied with the results obtained; but the divisions between them and the V. Corps passed a very different day.

The German assault on the IV. and VI. Corps, along the 7-mile frontage from Boursies to Bullecourt in the centre of the Third Army line, was delivered, according to plan, at 9.40 A.M., the enemy infantry beginning to crawl forward under cover of the bombardment some twenty minutes earlier. There had been fire fights at a few points from 8.30 A.M. onwards, but no actual advance. Thus no ground had been gained under cover of darkness and fog as on the front of the Fifth Army; for, by the time the left of the *Seventeenth Army* assaulted in this sector, the fog was patchy and beginning to lift; indeed it cleared off soon after 10 A.M. Owing, however, to the final heavy bombardment by trench mortars, the indifferent visibility—some three hundred yards when the smoke of the final bombardment was added to the last of the fog—and the suddenness of the assault, few men escaped from the front line to warn the troops in rear. Thus the first notice of the German break-in received by battalion headquarters, the men in the reserve lines, the machine-gun posts between the lines, and advanced sections of guns which had not been withdrawn as soon as the nature of the bombardment became evident, was in most cases the sight of the Germans close upon them, behind the dust and smoke of bursting shell. Sometimes, even, the enemy was already in rear of them, although some of the old hands had earlier recognised the change from the last crash of the bombardment to a creeping barrage.

#### *IV. Corps*

The Forward and Battle Zones of the IV. and VI. Corps

lay across the spurs of the eastern edge of the Artois plateau, which on the map seem to spread out towards the enemy like fingers of many hands ; on the ground they give the impression of rolling downland. These spurs offered no special features except a few devastated villages and deeply sunken roads. The enemy came on in what appeared to be six waves of small parties and columns. The eastern sector of the IV. Corps, in spite of the perfect system of cross-fire which had been established, was broken through at two places where valleys between spurs penetrated into it. These places were the valley leading south-westwards from Moeuvres to Louveral, northwards of Boursies, in the centre of the 51st Division (Major-General G. T. C. Carter-Campbell), and the adjacent valley lying south of Pronville, on the right front of the 6th Division (Major-General T. O. Marden). In these valleys the front line was on a forward slope, and there were no deep dug-outs, for these had been blown in daily ; the communication trenches, shallow and broken, led back to villages like Boursies and Louveral, the constant targets of enemy shells. Thus situated the defenders had never felt happy and knew they had little chance of escape. Having gained his footing in the 6th Division line the enemy proceeded to work left (eastward) behind the Forward Zone of the 158rd Brigade of the 51st Division, and managed to progress ; for the communication trenches were not defensible, and a counter-attack delivered by the 11/Essex from the right of the Battle Zone of the 6th Division failed to check him. The two footholds thus gained were then linked by an advance up the intervening spur, in the course of which the Germans are described as coming on in ten or twelve long lines, each line split up into small groups of five or six men, led by an officer or N.C.O., with other troops following in artillery formation.

In this brigade sector, as elsewhere, the troops occupying the Forward Zone<sup>1</sup> had been mostly killed, buried by the bombardment, or taken prisoner ; the few survivors were not capable of much resistance, and none returned to tell the tale. By 10 A.M. the enemy was closing from north-

<sup>1</sup> Consisting of 2½ companies each of the 1/7th and 1/6th Black Watch ; the third battalion of the 158rd Brigade, the 1/7th Gordon Highlanders, was in reserve.

The Germans who attacked the two divisions of the IV. Corps were 3 divisions of the XI. Corps, 3 divisions of the XIV. Reserve Corps, 5 divisions of the VI. Reserve Corps, total, 11 :—6 in first line, 2 in second and 3 in third. The odds in the first instance were 3 to 1 and finally 11 to 3.

west, north and north-east on the sharp salient in the Battle Zone which covered Louverval, with its wood and chateau. Against this position an enveloping attack quickly followed, supported by heavy machine-gun fire from the spur to the north. The wood was broken into by 10.30 A.M., and soon after eleven o'clock the whole of the Louverval salient of the Battle Zone was in German hands.<sup>1</sup>

The progress of the enemy had meanwhile been extended eastwards to the central sector of the 51st Division, held by the 152nd Brigade.<sup>2</sup> The defences at this point were good and well provided with dug-outs, but the left of the brigade had been turned by the enemy advance on Louverval, and, being attacked in front at the same time, the companies between the Bapaume—Cambrai road and the Louverval valley were forced back into Boursies, where for a time the Germans were checked. Here, as elsewhere in the Third Army area, the lifting of the fog permitted the heavy artillery, with air and ground observation, to break up large concentrations of the enemy, and the field artillery to engage many targets, of which opportunities the gunners took every advantage, in spite of serious casualties. But by 10.40 A.M. most of Boursies was in enemy hands, though its southern outskirts were not cleared until an hour later.

Men of the 1/5th Seaforth, 1/7th Argyll & Sutherland, and 1/6th Gordon Highlanders, and the 401st Field Company R.E. then manned a wired communication trench running from the front line of the Forward Zone east of Boursies to the Battle Zone, one thousand yards east of Doignies church. This trench had been sited as a switch by Lieut.-General Harper, when in command of the 51st Division, for this very purpose. The mist having quite cleared, the Highlanders were able to stop the repeated attempts of the Germans to emerge from Boursies at a time when this check was of supreme importance. Eventually the right of this new line of defence was forced back by the enemy bombing his way along the front trench of the Forward Zone to a point some seven hundred yards beyond the Cambrai road. This, however, was the limit of his advance on this flank.

<sup>1</sup> The exact hour at which all resistance round Louverval was overcome is uncertain ; it may have continued up to noon. At 12.30 P.M. Germans were seen nearly a mile to the south-west. Of the garrison, few, if any, succeeded in breaking out to continue the fight.

<sup>2</sup> The 1/5th Seaforth Highlanders held the left of the brigade, with 2½ companies in the Forward Zone ; the 1/6th Gordon Highlanders held the right with one company. With the Seaforth was a detachment R.E. The 1/7th Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders was in reserve.

Although the front formed by the 152nd Brigade after the fall of Boursies was severely machine-gunned about noon by aeroplanes, 17 being counted in the air at one time, it remained unbroken and practically without alteration for the rest of the day.

Further west, most of the Forward Zone companies of the 152nd and 153rd Brigades having been destroyed or pushed aside, there was little left to oppose an advance between the Louverval salient and Boursies; and by 11 A.M. the troops in the Battle Zone behind this sector, covering Doignies, were heavily engaged.

These defences were held, from a point due east of Doignies to just beyond the Bapaume—Cambrai road, by one company of the 1/6th Gordon and one company of the 1/5th Seaforth Highlanders, with a detachment of R.E. Enfiladed from the Louverval side, the trenches soon became untenable and had to be abandoned, whereupon the enemy pushed on towards and into Doignies. His advance, however, being made in close formation under effective fire from machine and Lewis guns, cost him heavy casualties.<sup>1</sup> Within the village, too, the attack suffered considerably from gun-fire over open sights, and from machine-gun fire sweeping the main street. Nevertheless, by noon, part of Doignies was in German hands, and by 2 P.M. all resistance had been overcome.

By the latter hour the attack had gained most of the Battle Zone between the left boundary of the 51st Division and the Bapaume—Cambrai road. After the capture of the Louverval salient, a line of defence had been hurriedly formed behind it by the battalion headquarters of the 1/6th and 1/7th Black Watch, with such men as could be collected, and in this line a gallant stand was made for two hours against the enemy's efforts to advance from the salient. In the end, however, the Germans, fighting exceedingly well, succeeded in forcing their way to the rear defences of the Battle Zone, manned by men of the 1/7th Gordon Highlanders, where, about 3 P.M., they were again held up. Here the left of the divisional line was suffering heavily owing to the fire directed against the neighbouring 6th Division.

Thus the outcome of the fighting on the front of the 51st Division up to 3 P.M. was that the line of defence ran some twelve hundred yards along the original front line of

<sup>1</sup> One machine-gun here fired forty belts of ammunition at close range before the officer working it was incapacitated by wounds.

its right brigade (the 154th, whose left flank only had been attacked seriously); thence it was thrown back across the Forward Zone, passing close to the south of Boursies to the Battle Zone a thousand yards east of Doignies; then it ran close to and round the east and south sides of Doignies to the rear line of the Battle Zone north of Beaumetz, and along it to the left boundary of the division.

On this new front line—known as the Beaumetz—Morchies line—where there were excellent well-wired trenches, the reserves of the 51st Division, aided by effective artillery<sup>1</sup> and machine-gun fire, stood firm against the enemy's further efforts. With plenty of ammunition, the infantry and engineers, as they said, had the best field-firing practice of their lives; in addition, help from the 19th (Major-General G. D. Jeffreys) and 25th (Major-General Sir E. G. T. Bainbridge) Divisions, in reserve behind the IV. Corps, was at hand.

Whilst the battle to the east of the Pronville valley was thus proceeding, the 6th Division also had been engaged in a fierce struggle. Its Forward Zone was difficult to hold, being exposed to enemy view and direct fire. On the right it crossed the re-entrant valley south of Pronville, passed over a long narrow spur to the Lagnicourt valley, over another similar spur to the valley of the Hirondelle, down the middle of which ran the boundary between the 6th and 59th Divisions. The Zone had less depth than was the case on most other parts of the line, especially in front of Lagnicourt and northwards, where it was only 500 yards. There had been some difference of opinion as to the best method of defence between the commanders of the two divisions which had held the sector before the 6th, with the unfortunate result that the necessary work had never been completed. In the Forward Zone underground shelter was insufficient—not a matter of importance, as it happened, for many men were caught in the dug-outs, the entrances having been blown in—and the machine guns had indifferent protection. In places there was no reserve line, or only such as had been constructed in a hurry; there were few communication trenches and none organized for defence against a break-in. Only the left of the front of the Battle Zone had dug-outs, and it was not wired. One battalion commander speaks of the sector as “the most disgusting” he had ever met, with little cover to fall back upon, once the Forward Zone had

<sup>1</sup> The German *24th Reserve Division* describes the artillery fire on Boursies, after its capture, as “unbearable”.

been lost, except a few strongpoints and the old "Corps System", that is, the front line of the Battle Zone.

The bombardment, especially on the centre and left, was particularly severe, and of the fight in the Forward Zone there is little to relate. Telephonic communication was cut in a very few minutes; few runners got through; losses were very heavy; and the struggle was of short duration.<sup>1</sup> It can have lasted, indeed, less than an hour; for the Battle Zone of the division, from the Pronville valley to the Hiron-delle valley, was engaged as early as 10.30 A.M. From that time onwards a firm stand was made against heavy odds: in addition to infantry losses, fifty per cent of the guns of the divisional artillery were put out of action early in the day, and the field companies R.E. lost half their strength.

The 18th Brigade held the right of the Battle Zone, and both its front battalions, the 1/West Yorkshire and the 2/Durham L.I.—the 11/Essex was in reserve—had desperate fighting throughout the day. Except on the extreme right, they held their positions; in fact, the 2/Durham L.I. captured four machine guns, with ample ammunition, and used them against the Germans. On the right the enemy, profiting by his success in capturing the Louverval salient from the 51st Division, succeeded in turning and forcing back the right of the West Yorkshire. A local counter-attack, in which the 1/7th Gordon Highlanders assisted, incurred very heavy casualties and failed to relieve the pressure on this flank. Early in the afternoon ammunition began to fail—though battalions had dumps of 70,000 rounds in addition to the 200 carried by each man—and the situation, always critical after the left of the 51st Division had been driven back, became desperate. A reinforcement of two companies from the 11/Essex was sent forward, and, arriving about 2.30 P.M., was used to prolong the right flank just in time to prevent the troops from being surrounded at that point.

About the same hour a message was received by Br.-General G. S. G. Craufurd from divisional headquarters which stated that it was hoped a counter-attack would be made against Louverval to relieve the situation, and urged the 18th Brigade, and the 71st Brigade next to it, to hold on if possible until dark. The counter-attack on Louverval,

<sup>1</sup> Various posts doubtless held out for some time—one, a platoon of the 1/West Yorkshire, until about 5 P.M., it is believed. A small proportion of the Forward Zone troops succeeded in falling back, fighting, to the Battle Zone.

however, did not materialise, and at 3 P.M., Lieut.-Colonel A. M. Boyall, commanding the West Yorkshire, reported that without further reinforcements the situation of his battalion was hopeless, that retirement was impossible, but that the battalion would fight it out to the last—a promise which was resolutely fulfilled.

The 71st Brigade,<sup>1</sup> astride the narrow spur opposite Quéant also made a good defence in the Battle Zone. Up to about 11.15 A.M. its front remained intact, several successful local counter-attacks having been made. But although he failed on the right, which held out all day, the enemy, coming on in great force, succeeded in breaking through up the Lagnicourt valley between the left of the brigade and its neighbour, the 16th Brigade ; he next forced his way into the ruins of Lagnicourt and, circling round the north side, soon gained possession of it. Having done so he could enfilade the rest of the brigade line ; a strong point, outside the south-east corner of the village, was twice penetrated, but on each occasion was retaken by counter-attack in hand-to-hand fighting during the morning. From this pivot the Sherwood Foresters, reinforced by a company of the 9/Norfolk and two companies of the 1/Leicestershire, formed a new line facing north along the crest, and later one of the Leicester companies made a left defensive flank by manning a wired communication trench, known as the Lagnicourt Switch, which extended from the western side of Lagnicourt to Morchies along the top of the spur. Although surrounded on three sides this position continued to be held during the afternoon, and thus all the enemy's attempts to break out of Lagnicourt were defeated, though he succeeded, about 2 P.M., in capturing two strong points on its outskirts.

On the front of the 16th Brigade<sup>2</sup> the heaviest weight of the first attack was directed on the left, up the Hirondelle valley, where the enemy soon succeeded, not only in overwhelming the Forward Zone, but in penetrating into the Battle Zone defences. Between this point and the right of the brigade, however, the front of the Battle Zone was held firmly until about noon, when, the enemy having captured Lagnicourt on the right (in the 71st Brigade area) and

<sup>1</sup> The 9/Norfolk and 2/Sherwood Foresters in front ; the 1/Leicestershire, with the 459th Field Company R.E. and one company 11/Leicestershire (Pioneers), in reserve.

<sup>2</sup> The 2/York & Lancaster and 1/Shropshire L.I. in front, with 3 companies each (the fourth company was manning a trench in the Battle Zone) ; 1/Buffs, with the 509th Field Company R.E. and one company 11/Leicestershire (Pioneers), in reserve.

Noreuil on the left (in the 59th Division area), the survivors of the 2/York & Lancaster and 1/Shropshire L.I. were compelled to fall back. They next made a stand in a trench—little more than a ditch—that edged the road joining the above-named villages, and was already held by a company of the Buffs supported by the divisional trench mortars, with both flanks drawn back. This line they managed to hold until about one o'clock, by which time, although the machine guns of the defence were doing considerable execution, the pressure became too heavy to be withstood by the weak remnants of the forward troops, so that a further retirement became inevitable. Covered by four machine guns which continued firing until the enemy was within forty yards of them, the companies fell back on the main body of the 1/Buffs in the rear defences of the Battle Zone. This withdrawal was greatly assisted by the fire of the XXIV. Brigade R.F.A., which kept its guns in action until the enemy was within point-blank range, and then succeeded in retiring by successive batteries without losing a gun. To support the 16th Brigade, a counter-attack was made between 2 and 2.30 P.M. by two companies of the 8/Border Regiment (75th Brigade).<sup>1</sup> This effort, aided by bombing attacks delivered by parties from the Divisional Bombing School, relieved the pressure temporarily, the enemy being driven back across the Mordelles—Noreuil road. The position reached on that road could not be retained, and by 3 P.M. the counter-attacking companies had been driven back again to the rear line of the Battle Zone. One battery, which covered the retirement, continued firing over open sights until the last moment and so was captured. On the above line the Border companies, with the remnants of the 16th Brigade, held on. The position now was that the right of the 6th Division, with its flank in peril owing to the troubles of the 51st Division, was still in the front of the Battle Zone; its left, owing to the retirement of the 59th Division, was in the rear line of that zone, whilst its centre was trying to maintain connection between the two wings.

<sup>1</sup> At 11.45 A.M., by IV. Corps orders, the 25th Division (Major-General Sir E. G. T. Bainbridge) was split up. The 74th Brigade and 112th Brigade R.F.A. were placed at the disposal of the G.O.C. 51st Division in the right sector, and the 75th Brigade, with the 110th Brigade R.F.A., at that of the G.O.C. 6th Division in the left sector. The 7th Brigade remained in corps reserve. Of the 75th Brigade, the 8/Border Regt. about 2 P.M. was sent to support the 16th Brigade; the 2/S. Lancashire was allotted to the 71st Brigade and placed in the rear defences of the Battle Zone east of Vaulx Wood, the 71st Brigade eventually falling back on it. The 11/Cheshire remained in 6th Division reserve near Mordelles.

### VI. Corps

The VI. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir A. L. Haldane) was disposed astride the upper course of the Sensée river, its front also broken by the Cojeul and the valleys of minor watercourses, whilst on its right lay the long Hirondelle valley. The Forward Zone had been sited well down the slopes on the edge of the great flat basin of the Schelde, and so enclosed Bullecourt; but it was hemmed in and dominated at its two extremities by two long spurs which extended well into the German lines. On the right, next the Hirondelle valley—itself a source of weakness, since its centre line formed a corps, divisional and brigade boundary—rose the Riencourt spur, which spread its four fingers north and north-eastward to afford the enemy valuable vantage ground, at any rate, for observation. On the left, actually in the area of the XVII. Corps, was the high and sinuous Monchy le Preux promontory.

The corps front was held by the 59th, 34th and 3rd Divisions, with the 40th Division available behind them.<sup>1</sup> The 59th Division (Major-General C. F. Romer),<sup>2</sup> on which the heaviest German attack was to fall, had the shortest line to hold. The 178th and 176th Brigades were placed in front, and the 177th in support, so that the Forward Zone was held by four battalions,<sup>3</sup> whilst for the defence of the front of the Battle Zone only two battalions were

<sup>1</sup> The Germans who attacked the three divisions of the VI. Corps were 6 divisions of the XVIII. Corps and one division of the IX. Reserve Corps, total 7: 4 in first line (111th, 221st, 234th and 236th, the last a position division), 2 in second (2nd Guard Reserve and 6th Bavarian), and one (239th) in reserve. The O.H.L. reserve of 3 divisions was available behind them.

One division, with another behind it, was responsible for the Hirondelle valley; the northernmost division was a position division, not intended to advance unless a favourable opportunity occurred; between these, three assault divisions were on the front between the Riencourt spur (inclusive) and the Sensée, two massed on the narrow front from the Hirondelle spur to the north-western outskirts of Bullecourt. After breaking through south-westwards and reaching Ecoust, the two northern of these three were, probably on the 22nd, to change front to the north-west (the divisions in second line filling the gap) and pushing forward on Croisilles and St. Leger, if not required as flank guard, to roll up the British line northwards.

<sup>2</sup> He had taken over command in April 1917. The 59th Division was formed in January 1915, with not more than 10 or 12 ex-Regular officers, and without any serving officers at all. It went to Ireland in April 1916, drafts of its best men being sent to France. Returning to England in January 1917, it crossed to the Western Front in February, its training still incomplete. It had never been in any serious action.

<sup>3</sup> 7th and 2/6th Sherwood Foresters (178th), 2/6th South Staffordshire, 5/North Staffordshire (176th), leaving the 2/5th Sherwood Foresters and 2/6th North Staffordshire for the Battle Zone.

immediately available, one round Noreuil, the other round Longatte—Ecoust.

The front defences of the Forward Zone between the Hirondelle valley and the west of Bullecourt formed a slight salient, part facing east, the remainder north. The position was a commanding one, if not strong, and there was an excellent field of fire, with grazing fire for machine guns for 400-500 yards in front of it. This availed little, however, as the fog on the low ground was still fairly thick at 9.40 A.M., before which hour there seems to have been little movement on this front except by patrols. The right of the Forward Zone, which faced east, had very little depth; for the front line had been smashed up by the bombardment, and the support line only was held. Here the attack broke through very quickly, and penetrated up the Hirondelle valley, although this line of approach was kept under the fire of 4·5-inch howitzers. The 7/Sherwood Foresters was overwhelmed.

Thus the enemy gained positions on the flank and rear of the reserve line held by the next battalion, the 2/6th Sherwood Foresters. The front defences on the left of the Foresters were also soon penetrated, and, though various posts between these two points of entry held out for some time, most of the battalion, which was now turned on the flanks and attacked in rear, had withdrawn fighting to the reserve line of the Forward Zone by 10.30 A.M. There they made a desperate resistance which was gradually overcome by enfilade and reverse fire from the east, combined with frontal attacks; the enemy along the railway, which crossed the front from Quéant to Ecoust, were even throwing bombs over the embankment and snatching rifles from the hands of men firing. The last stand made by the battalion was on its left flank, where the defence was not finally overpowered until 12.30 P.M.

The 2/6th South Staffordshire, on the right of the 176th Brigade, at the very outset was driven from its front line, which had been reported as practically obliterated by gunfire before 8.15 A.M.; but it held on in the support trench. This, however, was soon turned by masses of the enemy who appeared to the east about 10.30 A.M. To meet the danger, a defensive flank was formed right across the Forward Zone. Round this flank the enemy worked, as he progressed westwards, and so the position of the battalion, heavily attacked in front, soon became precarious. An appeal for help to be sent from the garrison of Ecoust (two

companies of the 2/6th North Staffordshire) was therefore made ;<sup>1</sup> but just before noon, when these companies were on the point of counter-attacking, they were themselves attacked from the east. The position of the South Staffordshire had by this time become desperate, and soon afterwards the battalion was completely overpowered.<sup>2</sup>

The left battalion of the 176th Brigade (5/North Staffordshire) covering Bullecourt, repulsed the first attack on its front, but shortly afterwards was driven from its forward defences and forced back through the village. At 12.15 P.M., supported by the heavy artillery, it was still clinging to the southern edge, but its reserve line was being rolled up from the east, and soon the remnants of the battalion were forced back north-westward to a communication trench running along the divisional boundary to the west of Bullecourt. Both there and in the defences further to the north-west a few survivors fought on for some hours.<sup>3</sup>

Thus shortly after noon the enemy was in complete possession of the Forward Zone of the 59th Division ; the four battalions and the forward artillery sections which had opposed him had practically ceased to exist.<sup>4</sup> Before noon, too, he had passed large forces through this zone and was pushing on against the defences in rear.

In the Battle Zone, where the fog had completely lifted, an attack on the defences covering Noreuil, held by the 2/5th Sherwood Foresters and an R.E. detachment, began as early as 10.40 A.M., being preceded by a heavy barrage. Met by fire from the defences and the covering batteries, the enemy ceased his frontal attack to wait for the effects of the advance round both flanks of the position, that in the Hirondelle valley being already perceptible. To meet these turning movements, the right flank of the defence was thrown back, whilst, on the left, a line was manned along

<sup>1</sup> Communication by buried cable still held good with the Forward Zone on the left of the 59th Division, though it had been severed on the rest of this front long before.

<sup>2</sup> The last message from the battalion headquarters dug-out, in the reserve line, came at 12.35 P.M. It was sent by an artillery officer, who telephoned that he was alone, that the enemy was then at the head of the dug-out steps, and that he had burnt all papers, and was smashing the instruments.

<sup>3</sup> A small party, which eventually succeeded in withdrawing, reported that it had fallen back from post to post, beating off many attacks, and that an officer who had been with it was last seen at 4 P.M. still firing a Lewis gun, though one of his hands had been smashed.

<sup>4</sup> Only one officer of the battalions of the 176th Brigade is said to have returned. A few survivors were collected at night, 2 miles north-east of Mory, and held a trench there.

the road from Noreuil towards Longatte. The movement up the Hirondelle valley gained ground so rapidly, however, that the right flank of this position was soon driven in, Noreuil was captured, and the men still holding trenches in front of it were cut off.

At noon, the 2/5th Sherwood Foresters, reduced to 150 men, was still clinging on near the south-west corner of Noreuil, with its right flank thrown back fronting the Hirondelle valley, and its left flank on the Longatte road, facing north-east. It was well supported by batteries of the 295th Brigade R.F.A., which, however, found difficulty in selecting targets, as British and German parties kept appearing alternately only some 300-400 yards apart. At this time the German infantry, although its detachments constantly advertised their position by means of white Very lights, had no effective help from the artillery, which put down a barrage on the western edge of Noreuil, some thousand yards in rear of the advanced troops. About 12.30 P.M.<sup>1</sup> a message reached the Sherwood Foresters, stating that supports were being moved up to a trench 500 yards behind Noreuil, and a runner arriving from the rear at that moment reported that he had seen men in that trench. Lieut.-Colonel H. R. Gadd thereupon decided to fall back on this support. It was just too late; before the retirement had proceeded far, the greater part of the survivors were surrounded from the north and cut off. Some held out until 3 P.M., but only a few managed to join the supporting force which had moved forward from behind Vraucourt about noon.<sup>2</sup>

With the loss of the Noreuil garrison, practically the whole of the 178th Brigade had disappeared from the battle, and of the 176th Brigade only the 2/6th North Staffordshire (Lieut.-Colonel T. B. H. Thorne), in Longatte—Ecoust, remains to be accounted for. This battalion had been disposed with two companies covering Longatte on the north-east and east, and two companies holding Ecoust, as already mentioned. In Longatte were also half a company of pioneers, and a detachment of Royal Engineers.

There had been fighting round both villages during the morning with parties of the enemy which had advanced

<sup>1</sup> According to German accounts, the attack crossed the Noreuil—Longatte road at 12.25 P.M.

<sup>2</sup> The men seen in the trench, as reported by the runner, seem to have been the leading parties of the 2/5th Lincolnshire sent up from the divisional reserve (see page 288).

in this direction after breaking through the Forward Zone. Some of these parties even succeeded in entering the villages; from which they were promptly expelled; it was not until nearly noon that really heavy attacks developed.

Against Longatte the first of these attacks came from the valley to the south. This was beaten off, but the enemy's numbers soon became overpowering, and by 1.30 P.M. the garrison, attacked on all sides, was overwhelmed.<sup>1</sup>

Almost simultaneously with the advance against Longatte, just as the garrison of Ecoust was about to undertake a counter-attack in response to the appeal for assistance made by the 2/6th South Staffordshire in the Forward Zone, as already related, large numbers of Germans were seen coming in columns of route from the north-east towards the latter village. They were forced to deploy, losing very severely from almost point-blank heavy artillery fire, including that of 9.2-inch howitzers placed in rear of Ecoust; from field artillery fire over open sights; and from the fire of machine guns in pits around the village. Nevertheless they managed to approach to within 200 yards of the railway to the north-east. A desperate struggle then ensued on the railway and around the cemetery in the north-western outskirts of Ecoust, the attack being assisted by low-flying aeroplanes.<sup>2</sup> The garrison of the village held on with admirable tenacity; but at last, about 2 P.M., with both flanks turned and practically surrounded, it was driven back, hustled by artillery fire, into the valley on the north-west of Ecoust. Here, after desperate efforts to break out, the survivors, numbering thirteen men, surrendered about 4.30 P.M.

Whilst the local struggles at Noreuil, Longatte and Ecoust were proceeding, the Germans had pushed on between these places towards Mory. Even the wheel north-westwards on Croisilles and St. Leger had developed and made considerable progress, as will be described in due course; but the employment of the reserves of the 59th Division first requires mention.

<sup>1</sup> Information is lacking as to details, but the remnants of the half company of pioneers are reported to have been captured "in the end of 'the village'" at 1.30 P.M. The detachment R.E. had previously fallen back to the rear of the Battle Zone.

<sup>2</sup> Platoons which had been detached from the garrison during the morning to hold the ridge to the north, owing to a report that the 84th Division had been broken through, were also heavily engaged.

Not until after 10.30 A.M., by which time all forward signal wires had been cut, was it known at divisional headquarters that very heavy fighting was going on in the Forward Zone ; that the weight of the attack seemed to be against the right of the division ; and that Noreuil was already threatened. Major-General Romer therefore decided to send forward a battalion of the brigade in reserve, whose commander was with him, towards Noreuil, and another towards Ecoust, in order to secure the intermediate line of defence in the Battle Zone behind those villages. Orders were despatched accordingly to the 177th Brigade, then between Mory and Vraucourt, whose men were playing football in spite of a few casualties from shell fire.

In accordance with these orders, the 2/5th Lincolnshire was directed to move towards Noreuil ; the 2/4th Leicestershire, towards Ecoust ; and the 4/Lincolnshire, into the rear defences of the Battle Zone to the east of Vraucourt. These movements, which amounted to a counter-attack, as the enemy was already in possession of the defences in question, were begun without artillery support, immediately following the receipt of the order at 12.15 P.M. Each of the two first-named battalions had about four miles to march to its objective. German aeroplanes soon afterwards began bombing around Mory and along the Bapaume—Vaulx road, causing a little delay, and much confusion among the transport.

The 2/5th Lincolnshire moved by successive platoons along the ridge north of the Hirondelle valley. After passing through the rear defences of the Battle Zone, it came under a withering fire from machine guns and rifles. Heavy casualties brought the rapid advance to a sudden stop, and, after further efforts to hold their ground, the Lincolnshire were driven back, eventually to take cover in a switch trench running southwards from Noreuil, whence they opened fire from both sides. The remnants of the battalion were, however, soon surrounded and overpowered, a few men only of the rear companies succeeding in extricating themselves.

The 2/4th Leicestershire was unable to reach its objective behind Ecoust. About four hundred yards from the village the leading company encountered large numbers of advancing Germans. After delaying them long enough for the gunners of a field battery, which had aided the advance, to remove breech blocks and withdraw, the company fell back on the main body of the battalion, which had just reached

and occupied in single line the rear defences of the Battle Zone.

After this failure of the attempt by the 177th Brigade to secure possession of the intermediate line of defence within the Battle Zone, owing to the rapid advance of the enemy, there was nothing left between the Germans and the rear defences of the Battle Zone except such field guns and machine guns as were still in action in front of the latter. Their detachments, who had already suffered severely from the bombardment, again came under heavy artillery fire; nevertheless, they remained in action and checked the advance for a time, inflicting many casualties at short range. Then, when the guns could no longer be served, the personnel fell back fighting, the gunners removing breech blocks and continuing to resist the advance with rifles and Lewis guns, whilst the machine gunners fired to the last. By such means, assisted by artillery fire from behind the Battle Zone and by aircraft which did excellent service,<sup>1</sup> some time was gained. By two o'clock, however, the enemy had reached Vraucourt Copse, capturing a battery of the XXVI. (Army) Brigade R.F.A. there; and by 3 p.m. he had developed an attack on the foremost of the two trenches forming the rear defences of the Battle Zone.

To hold these trenches, the only troops at first available were 2½ companies of the pioneer battalion (6th/7th R. Scots Fusiliers), posted across the Hirondelle valley, the 177th Brigade (already reduced by one-third of its strength), which continued the line to the Mory—Ecoust road, and the remnants of the machine-gun battalion. The last-named had already suffered severely, but still had eight guns and crews intact, posted at the head of the Hirondelle valley, where the dug-outs had not been touched by the bombardment. Behind the line were such of the guns of the 59th Division as had originally been in position there; these were joined by the artillery of the 40th Division, which came into action during the afternoon. On the left of the 177th Brigade there was a gap which was eventually filled, and just in time, by "details" (transport men, officers' servants, etc.) hurried up from headquarters. It was a

<sup>1</sup> "The English got valuable support from their airmen, who came in "regardless of consequences. Their squadrons, flying very low, found "admirable targets for machine guns and bombs in the thickly concen- "trated masses of the 111th and 2nd Guard Reserve Divisions". "Regt. "No. 73" (111th Division).

race between these men, advancing north-east along the ridge known as the Hog's Back,<sup>1</sup> and Germans coming from the east. Two machine guns, each under an officer, dealt with a hostile battery unlimbering north-east of Ecoust, firing until the tripods were hidden by empty cartridge cases. With their assistance the "details" won. During the afternoon the line was extended further northwards by two companies of the 1/East Lancashire of the reserve (103rd) brigade of the 34th Division<sup>2</sup>; by elements of the 176th Brigade; by some artillery personnel, with one 18-pdr. gun in the trench; and, later, by a company of the 9/Northumberland Fusiliers (103rd Brigade), and J Special Company R.E. from the south-east corner of St. Leger Wood. The gas experts and the Fusiliers had, like the "details", literally raced the enemy to reach the line, after hearing that the front of the 59th Division had been broken through.<sup>3</sup>

As there was practically no enemy artillery fire, these forces, weak as they were, succeeded in stopping the attackers, who did not get within three hundred yards. Lewis guns and machine guns—for the employment of which the ground was well adapted—did excellent service, and expended many rounds on massed targets<sup>4</sup> until the situation was improved by the arrival about 5.30 P.M. of two machine-gun companies<sup>5</sup> and later of infantry from the 40th Division. At one time, however, the right of the line was turned, so that the defenders were forced back to the rear trench and to a switch trench covering St. Leger, and the advanced headquarters of the 178th and 176th Brigades were captured; but, with further help from the 1/East Lancashire and 9/Northumberland Fusiliers, the front

<sup>1</sup> Running from "l'Homme Mort" (on 1 : 100,000 map), north-east and north of a line from Mory to Ecoust.

<sup>2</sup> The companies were brought from the rear of the Battle Zone on the Hog's Back, south of St. Leger, having been originally sent to cover the advanced headquarters of the 178th and 176th Brigades near l'Homme Mort and to counter-attack.

<sup>3</sup> The despatch of the 103rd Brigade to stop the enemy breaking through the rear defences of the Battle Zone is dealt with in the narrative of the 34th Division.

<sup>4</sup> One machine-gun section alone, posted north of Vraucourt, expended 20,000 rounds; and aeroplanes reported that the ground of Noreuil valley was covered with German corpses.

<sup>5</sup> The leading section of one of these companies, whilst crossing the west part of the Hog's Back en route, observed a German battalion in column advancing up a small valley at a range of 600-800 yards and shot it out of existence. Instead of taking cover, the drivers of the limbers stood in their stirrups to cheer the gunners as they shot down the enemy.

trench was regained. In spite of the heavy numerical superiority of the enemy attack—three divisions against one—at dark, when the 120th and 121st Brigades of the 40th Division came up, both trenches of the rear system of the 59th Division Battle Zone were still held, except for a number of “pockets” established by the enemy.<sup>1</sup> Of the 59th Division artillery, only two batteries (from positions 300 yards and 1,100 yards north of Vraucourt), and three other guns had been got away.

Next to the 59th Division, the 34th Division (Major-General C. L. Nicholson), holding the sector from the north of Bullecourt to a little beyond the Sensée river, with the Forward Zone in part of the old Hindenburg Line, was disposed, like its neighbour, with one brigade and the 18/Northumberland Fusiliers (Pioneers) in reserve. Although bombarded from 4.40 A.M. onwards, no definite attack was made on any part of the division until 11.30 A.M., for the enemy plan was to break in to the southward, and then, by wheeling two divisions from the second line north-westward, to take the 34th Division in flank and roll up its line.<sup>2</sup> Much labour had been expended by Major-General Nicholson during the previous weeks in preparing flank defences; so that, when the breach in the 59th Division front became apparent about 10 A.M., the 22/Northumberland Fusiliers (102nd Brigade<sup>3</sup>), on the right of the 34th Division front, carried out the instructions previously issued and practised in case of danger to the flank. The right company withdrew to the support line, special rockets being fired to inform the artillery that this had been done; then the right of this company was thrown back still further along the divisional boundary on the Hog's Back, with the right support company lengthening that flank to the rear. A little later a company of the 25/Northumberland Fusiliers, in brigade reserve, was sent to extend the

<sup>1</sup> According to German accounts, the attack was considerably hampered on this front by three incidents. The 2nd Guard Reserve Division of the second line, through over-eagerness, pushed forward into line when the Noreuil—Longatte road was crossed, instead of waiting until the 221st Division had changed front. This caused considerable congestion and confusion, with consequent heavy loss. Then grass fires delayed the advance. Finally, the attacking troops were very heavily shelled by their own artillery owing to some misapprehension of the situation on the part of the observing officers.

<sup>2</sup> The 3 divisions of the XVIII. Corps attacked the 59th and 34th Divisions in front and 2 second line divisions were to be responsible for protecting the right of the German attack as soon as Ecoust was taken. Gœs, pp. 28-30.

<sup>3</sup> Its other battalions were the 23rd and 25/Northumberland Fus.

flank still further. Unfortunately before it could reach this position the Germans had pressed in and surrounded the headquarters of the three battalions of the brigade, which were near together in a railway cutting. Nevertheless, from the flank already established, machine and Lewis guns, carefully sited before the battle, fired with great effect on dense columns of Germans moving from Bullecourt up the valley towards Ecoust.

When, about 11.30 A.M., the enemy, after renewed heavy bombardment, attacked the 34th Division both in front and flank, from the direction of Bullecourt, the preliminary measures taken proved sufficient to hold the advance for some two hours. Then a further extension of the north-westerly movement from Ecoust, now in enemy hands, enabled the Germans to work round the right of the right flank battalion. It was not until 1.30 P.M. that Major-General Nicholson heard that the Germans were in Ecoust : he at once ordered Br.-General J. G. Chaplin, commanding the 103rd Brigade, in reserve behind the centre of the Battle Zone, to move to the right along the rear of the zone towards St. Leger. The rest of the 9/Northumberland Fusiliers and the 10/Lincolnshire were immediately despatched. It was none too soon ; for from about 1.30 P.M. onwards, the flank of the 34th Division, in the Forward Zone and in the front defences of the Battle Zone, was gradually pressed back north-westward, though a desperate and prolonged resistance to the advance was offered by the 102nd Brigade. Many counter-attacks were made, the fighting was often hand-to-hand, so that the enemy's progress was both slow and costly.

Whilst this struggle to the north and north-east of Ecoust was developing, the Germans assembled forces to the south-east of Longatte for a further extension of the north-westerly attack. Soon after 2 P.M. these began to move round the south of the latter village, and then, wheeling to the right, advanced north-westwards against the Hog's Back. The first movements were made under fire of the British heavy guns behind the Battle Zone ; then, on topping the Hog's Back, the Germans, estimated at not less than five thousand strong, were met by heavy fire, over open sights, from two batteries of the 160th Brigade R.F.A., posted to the south of Croisilles. In addition the enemy was attacked by low-flying aeroplanes, while his left flank was subjected to heavy machine-gun fire from the long switch, " Croisilles Switch North ", which ran from north

of Croisilles to the right rear edge of the Battle Zone, covering St. Leger and the wood on the eastern side of the village. To overcome this fire bodies of Germans made no less than three attacks, all of which were repelled, the survivors retiring at the run after their third attempt. Other enemy columns, however, two reinforcing divisions having come up, reached a minor ridge north-east of St. Leger and overran the two batteries above mentioned which directly opposed their advance.<sup>1</sup> Yet even so, when descending the slopes towards the Sensée river, about 4 P.M., the enemy advance was again checked by heavy artillery fire, and machine-gun and rifle fire from Croisilles and from the defences to the west of this village, garrisoned by the 16/R. Scots from the reserve of the 101st Brigade. To the south-west the attack was held in front by the 9/Northumberland Fusiliers posted in the defences round the south-eastern part of St. Leger Wood. Fire from the machine guns in the rear defences of the Battle Zone still continued on the enemy's left, while his right was counter-attacked about this time by the three remaining companies of the 25/Northumberland Fusiliers, in reserve south-east of Croisilles. East of the village the defenders of the right flank of the 102nd Brigade were still holding their position, the possession of every communication trench of the 34th Division being hotly contested ; and as late as 5 P.M. the headquarters of the 22nd, 23rd and 25/Northumberland Fusiliers, about a mile south-east of Croisilles, though surrounded by the enemy, were still fighting.<sup>2</sup>

From four o'clock until nightfall heavy fighting continued along the Sensée, with little further loss of ground.<sup>3</sup> Croisilles remained in the hands of the 16/Royal Scots, one of its companies making a splendid defence of the railway embankment between St. Leger and Croisilles, and stopping

<sup>1</sup> The men of these batteries, when forced to abandon their guns, fell back about two hundred yards to the trench which now became the front line, and fought with rifles and Lewis guns until dusk, when they crept out, covered by rifle fire, and man-handled their guns back to the waiting teams. Both batteries were again in action in the early hours of the next morning.

Another battery of this brigade (160th), which was to the left of the others, lost two forward guns which were in action near Croisilles, but recovered them after dusk by sending up two teams of grey horses and coolly bringing them away.

<sup>2</sup> The attack here was made by the 234th Division (one of the original front divisions and the northernmost of the divisions ordered to change direction), which had failed to keep up with the general wheel north-west.

<sup>3</sup> "All blood flows in vain. Here and there small pieces of trench were 'taken ; here and there what was won, enfiladed from both sides, must be 'evacuated'. From the German account, Goes, p. 26.

the enemy after hand-to-hand fighting. The ground near St. Leger Wood was also firmly held. For the defence of the wood and of the area to the north and south of it, the divisional reserve, the 103rd Brigade, was still available, although part had already been deployed to extend southwards across the Hog's Back, so as to man the rear defences of the Battle Zone of the neighbouring 59th Division, and thereby prevent the enemy from breaking through. The remainder was now placed in position with two companies of the 1/East Lancashire on the right, the 9/Northumberland Fusiliers in the centre, and the 10/Lincolnshire on the left. During this operation a battery of the 160th Brigade R.F.A. did good service, as did the machine guns, of which one section expended 30,000 rounds.

The enemy was obviously pressing very hard, shouldering his way in and gradually enlarging a pocket at the junction of the 34th and 59th Divisions, until he had forced back the opposing troops to their third system of defence. About 6 P.M. the general situation of the 34th Division was as follows : the left half of the Forward Zone was still held ; thence a flank extended south-westwards, with an indent in the centre, to the front of Croisilles and St. Leger Wood ; next along the switch to the rear edge of the Battle Zone, connection being made with the 59th Division in the rear defences of the Battle Zone on which it had been forced back. If this system could not be held, the defenders had only a single line of unfinished trench—the Green Line—on which to withdraw ; into this trench the 34th Division ordered the pioneers (18/Northumberland Fusiliers) and the three field companies R.E. (207th, 208th and 209th), its last reserves. The crucial question was whether the line could hold out until the troops of the 40th Division hurrying up from Hamelincourt, four miles away, should come into action. It was with great relief, therefore, that Major-General Nicholson heard about 6.30 P.M., that the leading battalion, the 12/Suffolk (121st Brigade), had reported to the 103rd Brigade, and had been pushed forward to fill gaps in the rear defences of the Battle Zone. The perilous situation caused by the rupture of the 59th Division front in that zone had been overcome.

The close of the action in the 34th Division area was marked by the success of the heavy and divisional artillery in dispersing a considerable body of German troops seen assembling at 7 P.M. to the west of Ecoust, whilst the last heavy gun was got away along the railway from St. Leger,

dodging backwards and forwards to escape the enemy shell.

To sum up the battle of the Third Army thus far narrated: a huge pocket had been created in the VI. Corps front, the 59th Division having been driven back to the rear edge of the Battle Zone; the right side of the pocket was formed by the 6th Division (IV. Corps) which was extended from the front of the Battle Zone, where its centre still held, to the rear of that zone; its left side stretched into the 34th Division area right across the defences, from the front of the Forward Zone to the rear of the Battle Zone. A similar but smaller pocket had been created further south, the left of the 51st Division (IV. Corps) being on the rear line of the Battle Zone, the right side of the pocket extending from the front of the Forward Zone to the rear of the Battle Zone, and its left side across the Battle Zone. Thus between the Flesquières Salient (commencing two miles east of the village) and Fontaine les Croisilles, a distance of ten miles, all the Forward Zone had been lost, and the Battle Zone behind it, back to its rear defences, with the exception that between Louverval and Lagnicourt, the right of the 6th Division still had a small portion of the front line.<sup>1</sup>

#### *VI. Corps (continued)*

No serious action took place until the afternoon in the sector of the 3rd Division (Major-General C. J. Deverell) north of the Sensée river, which was not comprised in the German front of attack. The front line of the division ran athwart the long spur between that stream and the Cojeul valley, which it included. The position was not a strong one: the Forward Zone was formed of old German trenches, on a forward slope, but it had been strengthened by organizing for defence a communication trench on the 34th Division side, and by preparing an inundation in the Cojeul valley.<sup>2</sup> Being weak and exposed, the front was

<sup>1</sup> A German comment (Goes, p. 31), is that "zero day had proved to 'Below's Army that its opponent the British Third Army was not unprepared for the attack".

<sup>2</sup> The stream disappeared entirely underground near Boiry Becquerelle, and rose again just in front of the 3rd Division line. A large dam was constructed there by the 529th Field Company R.E., and blown up during the attack, flooding the ground on each side of the valley and hampering German movement.

only held by a thin piquet line, but the remainder of one battalion in each of the three brigade areas was at hand in support for local counter-attacks.

The German preliminary bombardment hardly affected the forward trenches at all, but was directed almost entirely on the gun positions and back areas. As elsewhere a series of local attacks in the nature of raids was, however, made during the course of the morning. The first of these took place about 7 A.M., in the fog, and captured some hundreds of yards of the front line of the 9th Brigade on the right of the division; but, after sharp fighting, the enemy was ejected three hours later. The next raid, made on the 8th Brigade in the centre about 11 A.M., was repulsed, the Germans withdrawing in disorder. Raids attempted on the 76th Brigade on the left were similarly beaten off. No further infantry action took place for some hours, but a heavy bombardment was opened and maintained until about one o'clock.

From 3 to 3.30 P.M. the front covering the Sensée valley, held by the left of the 101st Brigade of the 34th Division and the 9th Brigade, the right of the 3rd Division, was subjected to an intense bombardment of artillery and trench mortars; and then wave after wave of Germans in groups advanced north-westward across the front of the 101st Brigade, against the right and centre of the 3rd Division in order to attack Henin Hill.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of heavy fire, almost in enfilade, from the 15/R. Scots and 11/Suffolk of the 101st Brigade on the south side of the valley, the Germans broke in at the junction of the two divisions, carrying away the left of the 4/R. Fusiliers outpost line and the front of the 1/Northumberland Fusiliers (9th Brigade). The old German dug-outs in the front line were immediately blown up from the support line, as prearranged, but the Germans continued to come on, and penetrated nearly a thousand yards near the Cojeul. The support lines on both sides were not, however, lost, and defensive flanks were formed, the 4/R. Fusiliers giving assistance to the 1/Northumberland Fusiliers, and the enemy was then held. All his subsequent attempts to

<sup>1</sup> A knoll on the spur north of Croisilles above the Cojeul river.

This attack was made by the 236th Division, a position division in the line. Generally, according to the German plan, operations north of the Sensée were to be limited to threats of attack, but the IX. Reserve Corps had been ordered to co-operate from the south-east. The German success in driving in the 59th Division determined the local commander, Lieut.-Colonel Tieffenbach, to initiate the attack.

advance were repulsed, and the fighting gradually died down with no further change in the situation except that by 6 P.M. the 11/Suffolk had regained the front line which it had lost.

About noon Lieut.-General Haldane (VI. Corps), having no division in reserve at his own disposal, had applied to the Third Army for permission to use the 40th Division (Major-General J. Ponsonby), which was in G.H.Q. reserve to the south of Arras.<sup>1</sup> This request was granted in view of the heavy pressure on the corps front. The three brigades were in a state of immediate readiness but in different places ; communications were interrupted, and it was impossible to use motor cars to carry messages owing to the congestion on the roads behind the battle. Major-General Ponsonby (who was at corps headquarters at Brétencourt, 5 miles south-west of Arras) and his staff and messengers had therefore to use horses with the result that the movements of the 40th Division were somewhat delayed. As a first measure, the 121st Brigade, which was about Blaireville, was ordered to move south-eastward to Hamelincourt (4,500 yards west of St. Leger), in the Green Line behind the 34th Division ; and the 120th Brigade, which was about Hamelincourt, to march and occupy the rear defences of the Battle Zone in front of Vraucourt, in the right sector of the 59th Division. The 119th Brigade, about Mercatel, was retained in corps reserve and warned to be prepared to move at half an hour's notice. The divisional artillery was moved up towards Mory, and positions for the batteries were chosen behind the front of the 59th Division, Br.-General J. S. Ollivant, C.R.A. 3rd Division, taking over command of what remained of the 59th Division artillery.

The 121st and 120th Brigades received their orders at 12.30 and 12.45 P.M., respectively, and started thirty to forty minutes later, both with a little over six miles to go. The 121st, as it approached its destination about 4 P.M., had to proceed with military precautions, and soon deployed the 12/Suffolk and 13/Green Howards in front line. These, on the appeal of the 103rd Brigade, went forward into the trenches in the rear portion of the Battle Zone of the 34th Division about St. Leger and southwards, on the right of the 9/Northumberland Fusiliers, as already mentioned.

The 120th Brigade moving from Hamelincourt to Vrau-

<sup>1</sup> General Byng had applied to G.H.Q. at 10.50 A.M. for this division and two reserve brigades of heavy artillery to be placed at his disposal, and this had been sanctioned.

court, across country, practically along the trace of the Green Line and under artillery fire, covered its march by strong patrols and, as it approached Vraucourt, had to fight a kind of light advanced-guard action. As a result of a conference about 4 P.M. between Lieut.-General Haldane and Major-General Ponsonby, orders were now issued for the 120th Brigade to get in touch with the 6th Division, and the 121st to come up on its left. In view of the urgency of the situation, the 120th Brigade moved two battalions into the rear trenches of the 59th Division Battle Zone, but though Br.-General C. J. Hobkirk effected junction with the 121st Brigade and, after some difficulty, established communication with divisional headquarters, he was unable to gain touch of any sort with the 6th Division.

On reinforcing the Battle Zone of the 59th and 34th Divisions, the battalions of the 120th and 121st Brigades found "pockets" of the enemy established in them at various points, and in the fighting which followed after nightfall it took some hours to re-establish the line. This was at length accomplished, some prisoners and 14 machine guns being captured.

The 119th Brigade, by corps orders, halted at Achiet le Grand. Towards 5.30 P.M., when it was almost dark, Br.-General F. P. Crozier was ordered personally by a corps staff officer to take the brigade to Hamelincourt, as Henin Hill was thought to be seriously threatened;<sup>1</sup> the move began fifteen minutes later. Soon afterwards, at 6.45 P.M. the brigade received an order to go to Henin Hill, and by 10.30 P.M. it was in position on and behind the hill.

In addition to the reinforcement provided by the 40th Division, three brigades of heavy artillery, LXXXIV. (Mixed), LXXXVIII. (8-inch) and LXIII. (Mobile), were moved from the XVII. Corps front, at 4.30 P.M. to assist the VI. Corps, and at 5.30 P.M. the 2nd Guards Brigade and a machine-gun company from the Guards Division (Major-General G. P. T. Feilding) were sent to Mercatel, with a view to recapturing Henin Hill if it were found to have fallen. The 6th Battalion Tank Corps also was moved forward about noon from Wailly, which was being shelled by a long-range gun, to Boisieux St. Marc; but it was not brought into action, as there was no necessity for this.

<sup>1</sup> According to the corps war diary, a written order was despatched at 4.30 P.M., when Henin Hill was thought to be seriously threatened; but it did not reach the 119th Brigade.

*IV. Corps*

We must now return to the IV. Corps front and the continuation of this part of the battle after 3 P.M. At that hour the 6th Division, the 18th Brigade on its right, was still clinging to the front of the Battle Zone, although the right (1/West Yorkshire) had been turned, and there was a gap on this flank of nearly two miles with only two companies of the 11/Essex from brigade reserve covering it ; the 71st Brigade was holding a line across the Battle Zone east, south, and south-west of Lagnicourt ; lastly, the 16th Brigade was back in the rear defences of the Battle Zone. Desperate fighting continued until nightfall ; but the 18th Brigade, although the enemy worked farther round its right flank and small parties of Germans had tried to enter its trenches, was still holding its position at 7.15 P.M. The 71st Brigade, now consisting of little more than the 1/Leicestershire, with the 2/South Lancashire (25th Division) attached, and the 11/Leicestershire (Pioneers) and R.E. interspersed in the front line, held its new position with similar firmness until nightfall, several enemy bombing parties being expelled. Then, in view of the gap caused on the right by the retirement of the 158rd Brigade, and on the left by that of the 16th Brigade, to the rear of the Battle Zone, the commanders of the 18th and 71st Brigades decided to take advantage of darkness and the oncoming mist, and fall back to the rear trenches of that zone so as to get touch with the 51st Division and to make a better junction with the 16th Brigade. The enemy followed up the 18th Brigade closely, both directly and on the flanks, maintaining heavy machine-gun fire on the 1/West Yorkshire and 2/Durham L.I. Although forced to leave their wounded behind, the remnants of the brigade, 10 officers and 366 other ranks, managed to get clear, and finally reached and then organized the rear trenches of the Battle Zone. The 71st Brigade had less difficulty in its retirement, and was able to remove all its wounded before withdrawing.

The 16th Brigade, supported by the three divisional field companies R.E. which originally had been in reserve in the rear defences of the Battle Zone, with the 8/Border (25th Division) in reserve, maintained its new front in the rear line of the Battle Zone without great trouble, although a series of small attacks were made on it. About 2.30

P.M., and again at 4 P.M., the Germans broke into the position about Vaulx Wood, but counter-attacks, in which companies of the 11/Leicestershire and 8/Border took part, supported by field guns firing over the sights, on both occasions restored the situation. About 5.30 P.M. the extreme left of the brigade was subjected to a bombing attack from the Hirondelle valley, where the enemy had established himself in the defences of the 59th Division. Two posts were captured in this attack, but there, too, by 7 P.M., the situation was restored by two platoons which had been brought up from the Brigade Bombing School. A further attack was met by a company of the 8/Border, sent to strengthen the left flank, which finally, at 11 P.M., drove off the Germans, and re-established touch with the 6th/7th R. Scots Fusiliers (Pioneers, 59th Division) across the valley.<sup>1</sup>

No progress on the 51st Division front was made by the enemy after 3 P.M., although throughout the afternoon his low-flying aeroplanes machine-gunned the area near the Bapaume—Cambrai road. Attack and counter-attack continued until after dark, and small parties of the enemy occasionally broke in, notably about 9 P.M. between the left of the division and the 6th Division, only to be turned out immediately. During the afternoon strong reinforcements became available, the 74th Brigade and 112th Brigade R.F.A. (25th Division) having been placed at the disposal of the 51st Division at 11.45 A.M., the 57th Brigade (19th Division), with a company of tanks, at 3 P.M.,<sup>2</sup> and the XXIX. Brigade R.G.A. (from G.H.Q. reserve), at 4.20 P.M.

It was at first proposed to employ the 74th Brigade, then near Frémicourt, on a counter-attack towards Louverval;

<sup>1</sup> German accounts state that their own artillery played a considerable part in stopping the advance on Vaulx Vraucourt, the attack being twice "shattered by violent fire" from its own guns and rallied again with difficulty. This seems unlikely in view of the light signals employed by the German infantry to mark its position. The enemy claims to have eventually occupied the line one kilometre east of Vraucourt at dark, but states that he was driven out of it by a counter-attack and at midnight the British reoccupied the line strongly.

<sup>2</sup> The 19th Division (Major-General G. D. Jeffreys), less its artillery, engineers and pioneers, but with a battalion of tanks and an Army brigade of artillery, was ordered at 12.55 P.M. to move forward behind the 51st Division, and was at the same time placed at the disposal of the IV. Corps commander. The divisional artillery was already covering the V. Corps front. The engineers and pioneers were working on the Green Line and preparing the water supply. Subsequent events showed that it might have been better to have used the 19th Division intact to relieve the 51st.

but this intention was abandoned, and during the afternoon the brigade was disposed behind the Battle Zone with the 11/Lancashire Fusiliers and 9/L. N. Lancashire astride the Bapaume—Cambrai road between Beaumetz and M orchies, and one battalion in reserve.

Two battalions of the 57th Brigade, assisted by 12 tanks (8th Tank Battalion) were employed late in the day on a counter-attack designed to recapture D oignies.<sup>1</sup> The orders for this attempt were issued by the IV. Corps to the 19th Division over the telephone at 3.15 P.M., the brigade being then behind V élu Wood (at the left end of the V. Corps Green Line), and the tanks close by. In the absence of the divisional artillery, there was difficulty in arranging for adequate artillery support, and it was not until 6.40 P.M. that the counter-attacking troops moved forward from a position of deployment two thousand yards south-west of D oignies.<sup>2</sup>

The 8/Gloucestershire and the tanks were directed on D oignies, with the 10/Worcestershire on the left. The 10/R. Warwickshire remained in reserve to the south-east of Beaumetz, where it began digging itself in. Light was now failing, with mist forming, and it was quite dark when, under machine-gun and rifle fire, the outskirts of D oignies, at the bottom of the valley, were reached. The tanks could not proceed without light and withdrew to their rallying points; the Gloucesters, held up by the machine-gun fire and attacks on their exposed right, were unable to enter the village. Caught in a veritable trap, they suffered heavy losses, until, after a conference of company commanders, the battalion was withdrawn to a trench a few hundred yards up the slope—where it was to be overwhelmed 36 hours later. The Worcestershire reached the sunken D oignies—Beaumetz road and there hung on, with both their flanks exposed. Fortunately all firing soon died down.

Thus the general result of the fighting on the Third Army front was that no ground of importance in the Flesqui ères Salient had been lost, although some had changed hands; the IV. and VI. Corps had been forced back to the rear

<sup>1</sup> This counter-attack had actually been practised one day in a fog by the 57th Brigade.

<sup>2</sup> At 6 P.M. the corps commander again telephoned to the 19th Division asking if the attack could be cancelled, as he doubted its expediency; but it was too late to stop it.

defences of the Battle Zone on the whole ten-mile front between the Bapaume—Cambrai road and Fontaine les Croisilles. North of the Sensée only an unimportant part of the Forward Zone on the extreme right of the 3rd Division had been lost, and beyond this point, there had been no serious attack. The losses in the 51st, 6th, 59th and 34th Divisions had been very serious. The 47th and 63rd Divisions in the Flesquières Salient had suffered casualties amounting to nearly three thousand, from mustard gas, while many of the men less seriously affected could hardly speak above a whisper and were continually vomiting. Three divisions, the 19th, 25th and 40th, out of the five precious divisions in reserve had been employed.

Owing to the better visibility throughout the day, the air fighting in the Third Army front was more intense than on that of the Fifth Army. Offensive patrols began at 10 A.M. and were continued intermittently until dark, and there were many encounters, mostly indecisive ; the losses to the corps squadrons, with one exception, were due to fire from the ground. A great many artillery messages were sent down with good results ; while to the success of attacks upon troops and convoys, German regimental histories testify.<sup>1</sup>

The casualties for the day on the front attacked, as in the case of the Fifth Army, are in many cases not available ; but the gross figures—that is, including men who were missing and returned subsequently—were recorded in a sufficient number of cases to illustrate the desperate nature of the fighting and the tenacity of the troops who fought to the end and succeeded in preventing a breakthrough in spite of such losses. From the figures given, however, at least 10 per cent should be deducted in order to allow for the “missing” who rejoined their units at the end of the retreat after having spent the interval in the ranks of other battalions.

In the 18th Brigade of the 6th Division (excluding the details who did not go into action), the 1/West Yorkshire had two officers and 110 other ranks left at the end of the day; the 2/Durham L.I. (which had held on until ordered

<sup>1</sup> E.g. “Bav. Regt. No. 10”, “about a dozen British low-flying battle ‘machines whizzed up, and from an incredibly low height (20 metres at most), bombed our advancing troops”.

“Regt. No. 73”, “The [British] squadrons, flying very low, found ‘paying targets in the thickly concentrated masses of the 111th and ‘2nd Guard Reserve Divisions [east of Croisilles, VI. Corps front] for ‘machine guns and bombs”.

to retire), one officer and 94 other ranks ; the 11/Essex, six officers and 206 other ranks,<sup>1</sup> a total for the brigade of 9 officers and 410 other ranks.

In the 71st Brigade of the 6th Division, only about 120 of all ranks in each of the two battalions (9/Norfolk and 2/Sherwood Foresters) of the original front line answered the roll call. The 1/Leicestershire, which had been in reserve for the greater part of the day, had 338 of all ranks left. Of the two front battalions of the 16th Brigade, 1/Shropshire L.I. and 2/York & Lancaster, only 57 and 54 of all ranks came back from the Forward Zone.

The 176th Brigade (59th Division) lost 69 officers and 1,683 other ranks ; the 178th Brigade, 88 officers and 1,899 other ranks (leaving 5 officers and 53 other ranks). The total casualties of the 59th Division were estimated at 240 officers and 4,900 other ranks, including seven acting chaplains.

The troops forming the right of the 34th Division and the left of the 51st Division most probably suffered losses equal to those above mentioned ; and even where the fighting was less desperate, or of shorter duration, the strength of all units engaged was very much reduced by casualties and exhaustion. Many guns and much ammunition were also lost : no exact figures are available, but they do not seem to have been very high except in the 59th Division.<sup>2</sup> There is the curious commentary from one division that, in spite of having to blow up one 4.5-inch howitzer, "dug in in a very advanced position," it actually finished the day with more guns than it started with, having rescued some guns abandoned by a neighbouring division.

**Sketch 4.** The enemy's progress on the flanks of the Flesquières Salient already constituted a serious threat to the communications of the troops therein. The Germans had also disclosed such a great superiority of numbers, and the defence had suffered so heavily south of Gouzeaucourt and west of Demicourt (2½ miles north-west of Havrincourt) that, if, as was to be expected, the attack were pushed with equal force and determination on the 22nd March, a withdrawal from the Salient might be very difficult.

<sup>1</sup> Another return says that out of 30 officers and 639 other ranks, 28 officers and 571 other ranks were casualties.

<sup>2</sup> The total reported losses up to midnight 22nd/23rd were : 18-pdrs., 118 ; 4.5-inch howitzers, 27 ; 6-inch howitzers, 3 ; 8-inch howitzers, 2.

Moreover, the defence of the perimeter of the Salient required a large number of troops, while the constant shelling with mustard gas made its retention very costly. However reluctant commanders and troops might be to abandon the strong positions won only four months before, it was evident by the evening of the 21st March that part of the enemy's plan was "to pinch out" the Salient, and that at least the apex must be abandoned, and a withdrawal made to a shorter line of defence. Many officers now hold the view<sup>1</sup> that it would have been wise, and would in any case have saved many gas casualties, if a retirement from the Salient had been ordered directly the signs of the German offensive became unmistakeable. Its retention, acquiesced in by G.H.Q. "as a false front", proved a source of weakness: the delay in ordering evacuation when the Fifth Army was forced back left the V. Corps lagging behind the general line for several days, a result which added to the difficulties of keeping touch, and gave the Germans the opportunity to drive the corps north-westwards, thus contributing to enlarge the break which arose between the Fifth and Third Armies.

The 19th, 25th and 40th Divisions having been sent up, there remained at the disposal of the Third Army only the 2nd Division, weak and recently relieved,<sup>2</sup> and the Guards Division, the former behind the V. Corps, the latter (less the 2nd Guards Brigade, moved in the afternoon to the VI. Corps area), behind the XVII. Corps. The 41st Division in G.H.Q. reserve was being moved down from Lucheux to behind Albert.<sup>3</sup> Thus, there seemed to be sufficient troops in hand to renew the battle next morning, especially as

<sup>1</sup> Regimental officers at the time protested against being left in a salient deluged with gas shell and from the front line of which the field of fire was indifferent: whereas by withdrawal, the enemy, if he attacked, would be forced to advance over ground where he could be dealt with far more easily.

<sup>2</sup> Less part of its artillery, which, as mentioned in Chapter VI., was with the 47th Division. The 2nd Battalion Machine Gun Corps also remained with the 47th Division until the morning of the 22nd. Of the two artillery brigades of the 47th Division which had become detached from it, one only came into action on 21st March: it was used during the evening to support the counter-attack of the 57th Brigade on Doignies from positions near Vélu Wood.

<sup>3</sup> The 41st Division (Major-General Sir S. T. B. Lawford), which had recently returned from Italy, was moved forward from Lucheux during the night of the 20th/21st, under a fair amount of gunfire, to Achiet le Grand and Albert in tactical trains, the batteries marching.

The 1st Line Transport, carrying all Lewis guns, machine guns, Stokes mortars, etc., had been sent forward to Lucheux by road on the 20th, and did not rejoin the division until 28th March.

those who had survived the day, as in the Fifth Army, were by no means depressed by their losses, recognizing that, despite its overwhelming strength, the attack had failed to break through as was evidently intended.

The further outlook, however, gave cause for anxiety to the higher commanders ; they realized their own lack of reserves and drafts to meet a continuation of fighting of such intensity, whereas they knew that the Germans now had sufficient divisions and reinforcements available on the Western Front to carry through a policy of attrition.

As soon as the fighting had died down after nightfall steps were taken to reorganize the line of battle in readiness for a resumption of the attack by the enemy next day. In

**Sketch 4.** view of the heavy casualties from gas in the Flesquières Salient, and the loss of the front defences on either side, General Byng decided, with Sir Douglas Haig's approval, obtained by telephone, to order the withdrawal of the front line of the V. Corps from the apex of the Salient to the Intermediate Line during the night—that is, after 1 A.M., as the moon, ten days old, would be setting at that hour. This line lay some four thousand yards in rear, and had flanks thrown back on to the Battle Zone, thus including Highland Ridge, Havrincourt and Hermies.<sup>1</sup> An immediate retirement and withdrawal to the Battle Zone was considered, but this zone was weak, with few dug-outs, whilst the Intermediate Line here formed part of the old Hindenburg Line ; it was generously provided with deep trenches and dug-outs, and had been rewired. Havrincourt was a particularly strong position, with a wide field of fire ; in addition the line Havrincourt—Hermies possessed the advantage of flanking the German advance against the IV. Corps. The withdrawal, for which the arrangements, including the shelling by heavy artillery of the localities evacuated, had been carefully worked out some time beforehand, was completed by 6 A.M. without interruption from the enemy, who did not occupy the abandoned trenches—no doubt on account of their being infected with mustard gas—until after 6 P.M. on the 22nd. The VII. Corps on the right, and the IV. Corps on the left, were warned of the withdrawal and, in conformity with it, the right of the 51st Division, still in the Forward Zone, was

<sup>1</sup> The order was issued from Army Headquarters at 6.35 P.M., but took some hours to reach the troops, some of them not receiving the order to retire at 1 A.M. until 12 midnight.

drawn back between 1.30 A.M. and 4.30 A.M. to a line, already wired, passing about a thousand yards south of Dognies, from the north-west of Hermies to the rear of the Battle Zone. The similar withdrawal of the 9th Division (VII. Corps) to the Battle Zone has already been mentioned.

It was decided by General Haldane (VI. Corps) at 8.48 P.M. to abandon Croisilles, which was at the bottom of the Sensée valley, in favour of a position immediately north of and behind the ruins of the village, and to make other adjustments. After these had been successfully carried out, the corps line ran "in the firing line of the Third "System" (near the rear edge of the Battle Zone), skirted the eastern side of St. Leger and, seven hundred yards north of the village, joined the "Croisilles Switch North", in which it continued past the western side of Croisilles to the front of the Battle Zone; thence it went nearly due north to the right of the 3rd Division, which was still in the Forward Zone.

The situation report sent to G.H.Q. by the Third Army at 7.15 P.M., merely gave the front line, very accurately, but mentioned that the situation round Lagnicourt was obscure. The final report, timed 10.38 P.M., stated that the situation was unchanged, but that the enemy had bombed Achiet le Grand and Arras. No Army operation orders, except for the withdrawal from the Flesquieres Salient, were issued.

On the IV. and VI. Corps fronts much of the night was unavoidably spent in redistributing the troops; the field artillery moved back to alternative positions previously reconnoitred or prepared, while the infantry and engineers were assembled and reorganized. In consequence the men, exhausted though they were, obtained but little rest. Fortunately rations and supplies reached them: the enemy, doubtless equally tired, being moreover always averse to major operations at night, was faced with a reorganization problem of his own to solve and so gave little trouble. The necessary measures were completed before fighting recommenced next day. The two corps, with many of their battalions at a strength less than the establishment of a company, then stood as follows:—

51st Division: The 154th Brigade still held the right; the 57th Brigade (19th Division), with the 10/R. Warwickshire in reserve, held the centre, south-west of Dognies.

The 152nd Brigade continued the line to the Bapaume—Cambrai road, with the 1/6th Seaforth and one company of

the 1/8th R. Scots (Pioneers) in line, and two battalions, with the remainder of the pioneers, in reserve.

The 158rd Brigade (1/7th Gordon and the remnants of the 1/6th and 1/7th Black Watch) held the left of the division with all three battalions in line.

Behind the left of the division was the 19th Division (less the 57th Brigade, in line), whilst the battalions (11/Lancashire Fusiliers and 9/L. N. Lancashire) of the 74th Brigade, 25th Division, at first in close support, had been pushed up on either side of the Bapaume—Cambrai road, which was prepared, by felling trees, to stop the advance of enemy tanks. The XXIX. and LXXXI. Brigades R.G.A., which had been placed by G.H.Q. at 4.30 P.M. at the disposal of the Third Army and allotted to the IV. Corps, were sent to the 51st Division during the night.

**6th Division :** The 18th Brigade remained on the right covering the front and both flanks of Morchies.

The 71st Brigade continued the line with one battalion (1/Leicestershire); its other two battalions were held in reserve.

The left centre of the front was held by the 2/South Lancashire (75th Brigade, 25th Division) and the 11/Leicestershire (Pioneers), interspersed.

On the left were the 8/Border (75th Brigade), the 1/Buffs (16th Brigade) and one company of the 11/Leicestershire (Pioneers).

The two remaining battalions of the 16th Brigade were in reserve.

Behind the 6th Division, there were one battalion (3/Worcestershire), 74th Brigade, one battalion (11/Cheshire), 75th Brigade, and the whole of the 7th Brigade (25th Division), besides divisional R.E. companies and the pioneer battalion of the 25th Division.

**59th Divn :** The 120th Brigade and part of the 121st Brigade of the 40th Division having come into the line of the 59th Divn, the latter division was ordered to retire and rally round Mory. What remained of the artillery of the 59th Divn continued in action, but the 177th Brigade and one machine-gun company were transferred to the 40th Division, and disposed in support.

**34th Division :** The left of the 121st Brigade (40th Division) occupied that part of the 34th Division front lying between the original left boundary of the 59th Divn and St. Leger Wood.

The 103rd Brigade continued the line along the eastern edge of St. Leger Wood and thence northwards for about a thousand yards.

The 102nd Brigade carried it north-eastwards to and along the northern outskirts of Croisilles.

The 101st Brigade held the remainder of the front to the divisional boundary. The 119th Brigade (40th Division) withdrew from Henin Hill shortly after midnight and was placed in reserve twelve hundred yards west of St. Leger. It left one machine-gun company on the hill ; the other company allotted to the division accompanied it into reserve.

3rd Division : The 3rd Division held its original front, except that the right flank was bent back up the Cojeul valley. Behind it the 2nd Guards Brigade was in reserve at Mercatel.

No operation orders were issued by G.H.Q. during the 21st ; but Sir Douglas Haig had given approval for the retirement of the Fifth Army to the line of the Crozat canal, and of the V. Corps from the forward part of the Flesquières Salient. Directions had been issued for certain moves of the divisions in reserve : the 20th, 39th and 40th were released and handed over, the two first to the Fifth Army and the other to the Third Army ; the 41st, after detraining at Achiet le Grand and Albert was instructed to concentrate north of Bapaume, where, a few reinforcements still available in the VI. Corps Reinforcement Camp, joined it by bus.

In addition, the following moves of divisions were ordered :—

At 6.15 P.M. the 8th Division, in the Second Army area, by rail to the Fifth Army, entrainment beginning at 3 A.M. on the 22nd.

At 11.15 P.M. the 35th Division, in the Second Army area, by train " forthwith " to the Fifth Army.

At 11.15 P.M. the 31st Division, in the First Army area, by road to the Third Army, the movement to be completed on the 22nd.

During the afternoon the XXIX. and LXXXI. (Mobile)<sup>1</sup> Brigades R.G.A. and the 8th Siege Battery (6-inch guns) had been sent from the G.H.Q. reserve to the Third Army, and at 7.45 P.M. the XCII. (Mobile) and XCIX. (8-inch howitzers) Brigades R.G.A., the 65th Siege Battery (12-inch howitzers)

<sup>1</sup> 60-pdrs. and 6-inch or 8-inch howitzers.

and the 155th Army Brigade R.F.A. were shifted from the First to the Third Army area, still remaining in reserve.

#### GENERAL REMARKS ON THE 21ST MARCH

The enormous concentration of men and material effected by the Germans on the threatened front had been fully realised by the British staff, so that the weight of the attack did not come as a surprise ; nor, finally, did the place or date of the assault. The main reason for the failure of the defence as a whole on the 21st March is to be found in the fact that the British Army was extended over too great a length of front for its strength. Never before had the British line been held with so few men and so few guns to the mile ; and the reserves were wholly insignificant. It needed but a glance at the General Staff situation map showing the long thin British line of 126 miles, with only eight divisions spaced out behind it, two to each Army, in general reserve, to be filled with deep and lasting apprehension of the situation. In spite of his protests, Sir Douglas Haig had been compelled to take over additional frontage from the French. The establishment of his Armies had been lowered by the reduction of the infantry from twelve to nine battalions per division, together with other economies of man power. The losses of the previous year had not been made good, and the presence of too large a proportion of untrained and unseasoned officers and men further weakened the units—since no less than 19 out of the 21 divisions in the front line of the Fifth and Third Armies had been engaged in the Passchendaele battles, in which they lost a large proportion of their best soldiers whose places had been filled, if filled at all, by raw drafts and transfers. So much time had necessarily to be devoted to the construction of defences, particularly in the Cambrai area—which had been disorganized by the December fighting—and in the sectors taken over from the French, that there had been small opportunity for training and “shaking down” into the new reduced divisional organization. On the other side, as a result of the collapse of Russia, the enemy not only had in hand a huge reserve but was able during the winter months to give to these divisions, as to a majority of the others on the Western Front, both rest and specialized training.

The general distribution by Sir Douglas Haig of one division, excluding reserves, to 6,555 yards of front in the

Fifth Army, 4,900 yards in the Third Army, 4,800 yards in the First Army, and 3,555 yards in the Second Army, must be accounted sound in view of the relative strategic importance of the sectors. Loss of ground in the north meant that the B.E.F. would be driven back on the coast, whilst the Fifth Army could give a good deal of ground without, perhaps, excessive danger. The course of events actually proved this view to be correct. Even when the defending troops are of much the same fighting value as the attackers, there is no certain method by which the latter, if in sufficient force, can be prevented, after a heavy bombardment, from penetrating into the front system of defence. This had been demonstrated time after time in 1915, 1916 and 1917, both on a small and on a large scale, with the corollary that there is no hope of recovering the lost trenches unless the defenders are able to throw in strong reserves to counter-attack, and to counter-attack at once. During the 21st March and following days the British forces were numerically very inferior to the German, and the reserves were small; lost ground could therefore rarely be regained, and if regained could not be held.

The fog enhanced the value of superior numbers by restricting the fire of the infantry defence to very close range, thus minimizing German losses, although it did not prevent the artillery from firing on predetermined areas. Like the obscurity of night, it rendered nearly useless the machine gun, that weapon which, given opportunity, can in a few moments destroy any balance of numbers with which an attack may start, as we had experienced on the Somme in 1916. Moreover the system of defence adopted was particularly dependent on the machine gun. Mist, or the semi-darkness of early dawn, on the whole, favours the attackers, enabling them to approach unseen, and escape not only the machine guns and rifles of the trench garrison, but also the artillery barrages which would be called for, if their approach had been observed, and communications, either cable or visual, were intact. On the other hand, it does not seem probable that the German artillery bombardment, deliberately begun in the hours of darkness, would have been more accurate had there been no fog, because experience has shown that, although good visibility might have enabled a few minor corrections to be made, any considerable re-adjustment is impossible once an artillery and mortar bombardment on such a large scale has been launched.

The German infantry does not appear to have been hampered by the fog, although it had to advance over unknown ground, with the ever-present fear of walking into traps. Enemy accounts show that, having good maps, the various parties had little trouble in moving by compass whilst the fog lasted, and very few of them went astray. In fact, the fog favoured the enemy's bold infiltration tactics and enabled his parties, working independently, to pass through the intervals in the forward defences to reach the Battle Zone more quickly than they could otherwise have done. The British were given little time to man their defences, employ their artillery, bring up reserves, and execute the local counter-attacks which had been rehearsed, still less to devise and order new manœuvres to meet unforeseen situations. The destruction of communications and the unexpectedly early appearance of the Germans before the Battle Zone prevented the heavy artillery from playing its full part, but such of the field artillery as was not captured in the Forward Zone gave great assistance by close co-operation with the nearest infantry. The deadly rapidity of the enemy advance was assisted by the good and practically undamaged surface of the ground, quite unlike the laboured progress of our own troops over the cratered surface and clinging chalk of the Somme, or the liquid mud of the later stages of Passchendaele.

There were excellent reasons for adopting the principles laid down by the German General Staff<sup>1</sup> after nearly three years' experience of the defensive on the Western Front. That defence must be in depth admitted of no doubt whatever; but one of the first principles of the German instructions could not be observed: their Forward Zone (*Vorfeldzone*) was only a means of delaying the enemy. Its basic difference from the Battle Zone was that the defences of the latter must be "more carefully developed and more "numerous". Actually, the British Forward Zone, the old front system, was stronger in every way than the zones in rear of it. Had the Battle and Rear Zones been elaborated by a labyrinth of trenches and switches, tiers of wire, and hundreds of "pill-boxes", machine-gun nests and deep dug-outs, after the German model, they would no doubt have been capable of a prolonged defence; but time and labour had been lacking to do in six weeks what had taken even the Germans months if not years. Although the fighting troops had been overwrought by work with pick and shovel, none

<sup>1</sup> See page 41.

of the machine guns, on which the defence depended, were in ferro-concrete emplacements, a few had not even splinter-proof cover, and deep dug-out accommodation for detachments and weapons was rare. The three zones existed, but practically only on the Staff maps : on the ground the Forward Zone was represented by the old front system, the high-water mark of the last offensive, and looked upon as a jumping-off place for the next ; the Battle Zone consisted of little more than two lines, the front line being the old "Corps line", and the back line the old "Army line", with very little between them ; and the Rear Zone, no more than a "Green Line", was marked by shallow digging, with some patches of wire in front of it.

It must be pointed out also that the instruction to be found in the German manual, "the mass of the garrison (including "machine guns) is to be accommodated in the back lines, "in the intervals, in the communication trenches and in the "open", could not be observed, as the length of front line was so great in proportion to the number of men available, and absorbed so many battalions, that the garrisons of the two rearward zones had of necessity to be smaller than they should have been, even had the defences been complete. Thus the root principle of the German defence, which, based upon counter-attack, was to be "active and mobile, not "tied to the trench system", could not be observed. Counter-attacks were certainly made, but with wholly insufficient forces. As so often in its history, the British Army had been called on to undertake a task beyond the power of its numbers.

There were continuous lines of trenches in the Forward Zone, but the garrisons as a rule were disposed not in lines but in posts, strongpoints, etc., for all-round defence, at varying distances from one another, but able to cover all the intervening ground with fire. It was an excellent system for providing defence in depth with a minimum number of men, given good visibility ; but it proved entirely unsuited to the conditions of fog—and might have failed had artificial smoke been employed—as mutual support was out of the question, and the artillery could not, deprived of observation, help to bar the gaps as theoretically arranged.

On other grounds, there was a general objection among the fighting officers to the distribution of the troops in small packets, the "blob" system of defence, as it had been called, in derision, before the War, for it was not a new

theory. Some even went so far as to call the policy "suicidal"; for without strong reserves to counter-attack the enemy if he penetrated the intervals, the surrender or annihilation of the posts must be only a matter of time. The majority of experienced fighters, in view of the inadequate number of men available and lack of strong counter-attack forces, would have preferred a definite line of resistance in each zone, with posts, machine-gun nests, and switches, arranged in depth behind it to limit any enemy entry into the line.

The British soldier has times without number defended isolated posts to the death; he did so on the 21st March 1918, and was to do so repeatedly during the next week. But he prefers to fight in line. An old N.C.O. of 1914 summed up the new system in discussion with an officer: "It don't suit us. The British Army fights in line and "won't do any good in these bird cages." For its numbers, the III. Corps, which was disposed in line in the Battle Zone, rather than in depth like the XVIII. Corps next to it, may be held to have done remarkably well. There is general testimony that all the German frontal attacks failed; it was by finding a way round that the enemy succeeded.

There were too many inexperienced young officers and too many untrained young soldiers to ensure a reliable garrison for every post, even without the special trial to which the fog subjected them. The platoon commanders were unable to exercise control over more than the posts in which they had selected to be, the section posts were unaware whether those on the flank were holding out or had been captured, with the result that there was a lack of confidence on the part of small and, on account of weather conditions, isolated garrisons. To British troops, whose instinct is to fight it out where they stand, there came no thought of "elastic yielding", and considerable doubt existed as to whether the garrisons, when the enemy was already in rear of them, should hold on to the last regardless of what was happening on the right or left. Some even of the best of the new officers did not realize that they must use discretion as being "the men on the spot", and that even orders to hold on may in extreme circumstances be disregarded. No warning seems to have been given to any brigade or battalion commanders, and therefore none to the lower ranks, that in certain circumstances there might be an ordered retreat; divisional routes had been

reconnoitred for this, but information of such nature was certainly withheld from regimental officers.

So the garrisons of the posts fought to the end, taking heavy toll of the enemy, slowing but not stopping his progress.

#### NOTE I

##### SUMMARY OF INFORMATION PUBLISHED IN MAY 1918 AND PREPARED IMMEDIATELY AFTER EVENTS BY ABOUT 70 BRITISH OFFICERS, MAINLY FROM THE 16TH DIVISION, CAPTURED DURING THE FIRST DAYS OF THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE.

- 1) The position of our strongpoints was well known to the enemy who, under cover of the mist, came through on flanks. In some cases, battalion headquarters were captured before the strongpoints, some of which held out for 48 hours after the attack had passed between them.
- 2) German officers led their men in the attack. Mutual support (both lateral and from front to rear) of German infantry was good. Where support was required it was invariably given at once.
- 3) German artillery was very well handled and was close behind infantry at the beginning of the attack, but was much delayed at certain points by loss of horses from rifle and machine-gun fire.
- 4) Preliminary bombardment was not as heavy as had been expected.
- 5) German and captured British tanks were used. The German tanks appeared to be faster than our own. Tanks were used for flattening out wire and clearing up strongpoints in co-operation with infantry.
- 6) Gas was of all sorts ; our gas masks were adequate.
- 7) Pioneers came over with second and third waves and bridged shell holes and trenches as soon as each position was captured.
- 8) German aeroplanes flew in advance of attacking infantry at height of 200 feet, firing with machine guns at infantry in trenches and at gunners. Very few casualties from this fire, which, however, kept our men's heads down.
- 9) Fog was the main cause of our failure to beat off the attack, but intercommunication between strongpoints was generally described as faulty, and it was not possible to cover the ground between strong points with fire, except when visibility was good.
- 10) Not enough work had been done on our second and third lines.
- 11) S.O.S. signals could not be seen in the fog.
- 12) Cables were not buried and all lines were cut by the bombardment.
- 13) Our ammunition supply was sufficient.

14) Attack was not a surprise. Units had been warned that there could be no retreat.

## NOTE II

THE GERMANS ON THE 21ST MARCH<sup>1</sup>

The success of the Germans on the 21st March did not appear as important to them as it did to the British commanders ; the only real advantage had been gained by the *Eighteenth Army*, " which " obviously had struck a weak spot ". The communiqué on the day was short : " From south-east of Arras to La Fère we attacked " the British positions. After a heavy bombardment of artillery and " trench mortars our infantry assaulted on a wide front and every- " where captured the enemy's first lines." General von Kuhl, the Chief of the General Staff of the Group containing the other two of the three attacking German Armies, says : " the hoped for objectives " were not reached ". His commander, Crown Prince Rupprecht, states clearly that the expectation had been that the British artillery positions would be over-run, and it had not been fulfilled. He notes on the 22nd March that, " the *Second Army* so far has only captured " about fifty guns, the *Eighteenth* only about eighty . . . the number " taken by the *Seventeenth Army* is not yet known, and the number " of prisoners is equally small " (the totals were subsequently reported as 48 guns and 5,541 prisoners, the guns certainly under the mark). " On the other hand, in spite of apparent lack of plan in the British " artillery fire . . . there were said to be serious losses of material in " the artillery of the *Seventeenth* and *Second Armies*, which probably " took place during the forward change of position of the batteries."

The Bavarian Crown Prince drew the conclusion that the British Fifth Army was in the act of voluntarily retiring to the Crozat canal when the attack took place, and that " it is possible, on the front of " the *Second* and *Seventeenth Armies*, that the British had planned to " slip back to the Third Position [that is the back line of the Battle " Zone], and that this movement had been initiated even before the " attack ".

From the Kaiser and the German Crown Prince, as will be seen, came shouts of " Hurrah " and " Victory ", but their feelings do not appear to have been shared by any responsible commander. Ludendorff makes no remarks on the results of the first day ; it is significant that he left with the attacking Armies the heavy artillery which, if Sketch 6. success were achieved, he had intended to shift northwards, in order to carry out the attack " Mars " on Arras, so as to secure that pivot and lengthen the front of attack.

Before the offensive, the *Eighteenth Army* found the British on its front " fairly lively ", especially their artillery and air forces, and it was therefore believed that the imminence of an attack had been discovered. On the evening of the 20th March " harassing " fire fell on the German trenches, and a large raid was made on their *III. Corps* front just north of St. Quentin. Nevertheless, the deployment

<sup>1</sup> The information in this and similar notes on other days is taken from Rupprecht ii., Kuhl, Goes, Schwarze iii., Foerster, Ludendorff, and *Militär Wochenblatt*, March 1928.

for the assault was carried out exactly according to plan. The bombardment provoked "no strong reply"; and the assault, which started punctually at 9.40 A.M. (this does not agree with the British account) at first encountered little resistance and went smoothly forward; later the British recovered themselves, offered strong resistance and also made counter-strokes.

By midday the British front position had been broken through everywhere, but fighting was still going on around the important pivot of Urvillers ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles north-east of Essigny, in the Forward Zone, held by the 8/K.R.R.C.). La Fère had already been traversed and a crossing over the Oise secured; but British artillery fire made the passage of further troops difficult. In the evening *Gay's* group of divisions, reinforced by a few *Jäger* battalions, was on the long line Quessey—Travecy—Vendeuil (the latter two places in the front part of the Forward Zone), and required to be strengthened. The *IV. Reserve Corps* had reached Benay (in the middle of the Battle Zone), but had "come to a stop" in front of Vendeuil and Hinacourt (in the rear portion of the Battle Zone). The *XVII. Corps*, after storming Urvillers, pushed forward into the middle of the Battle Zone, from Essigny to Contescourt. The *IX. Corps* and *III. Corps* had also "reached" the Battle Zone, and "it was now most important to break down resistance in the wood west of Holnon, so that the left of the *Second Army* could get forward".

The Kaiser was present at the battle in an observatory of the *Eighteenth Army* and, as Crown Prince Rupprecht states, "had the previous day taken over *pro forma* the Supreme Command of the battle. . . . In a letter to a provincial *Landtag*, he announced a "complete victory, which, truly, was very doubtful." The German Crown Prince was apparently of the same view as his parent; for he ordered:

"The *Eighteenth Army* will continue attacking—even during the night. North of the Somme it is important to cross the road Tertry—Beauvois [7 miles west of St. Quentin]—Le Hamel as soon as possible. The task of the Army, to facilitate the advance of the *Second Army* by attack in flank and rear of the enemy still in front of that Army, remains good in its widest sense."

No one paid any attention to this order, and the Fifth Army, as we know, withdrew in the night from the front of the *Eighteenth Army* unmolested even by a patrol.

Soon after the beginning of the bombardment, the *Second Army* "suffered from a lively reply, but later the hostile artillery was nearly completely silent". At daybreak parts of the *XXXIX. Reserve Corps* stormed the front trenches of the Flesquières Salient at Marcoing and southwards, in order to hold the British there. Elsewhere the assault at 9.40 A.M. broke through the Forward Zone to the line Hargicourt—Ronssoy—Lempire—Epéhy, and "to the line covering the artillery on both sides of Le Verguier, but encountered lively resistance, especially at Epéhy, which often took the shape of counter-attacks". The issue of the fight remained doubtful until the fall of Templeux le Guérard, Ronssoy and Lempire about midday. This seems to have ended the effort of the *Second Army*, and its night report showed Epéhy and Le Verguier still in British hands. During the evening the right of the *XIV. Corps* and the left of the *XXIII. Reserve Corps* were instructed to make a special effort down the Cologne valley past Templeux le Guérard to the line

Roisel—Villers Faucon, a mile and a half further, but made no move to do so. For next day the Army was ordered at 9.50 p.m. to continue the advance on the original objectives of the 21st.

The storm divisions of the *Seventeenth Army* reached their assault position undisturbed, and here also the British artillery reply to the bombardment was reported as "only weak". The front and support trenches from Boursies to Bullecourt (the front assaulted, held by the 51st, 6th and 59th Divisions) were gained by 10 A.M., and by 1 p.m. the four corps concerned had pushed forward to "Doignies—Noreuil"—ground between St. Leger and Ecoust", that is the front part of the Battle Zone. Heavy fighting now took place for "the British" artillery position and the second position : there were counter—"attacks from Frémicourt, Vaulx-Vraucourt and Ervillers". Here, again, the Germans seem to have exhausted their initial momentum early in the afternoon, and the 9 p.m. report of three corps of the Army places them in front of the Battle Zone, the fourth, the southernmost, held up midway between the two zones, whilst a fifth, the *IX. Reserve*, in consequence of the initial success of these corps, had taken possession of the Forward Zone on its front. The British "had offered unexpectedly strong resistance"; the activity of their aviators had been "desperate"; overheard wireless messages alone gave comfort, reporting "extraordinarily high casualties". The Army orders, issued in the evening, merely directed the continuation of the attack with the principal weight on the left wing, in order to ensure co-operation with the *Second Army*.

The *Militär Wochenblatt*, summing up in an anniversary article on the battle ten years later, in March 1928, said :

"The *Seventeenth Army* encountered strong resistance before the "British Second Position [Battle Zone] and could not gain ground "beyond it in the course of the first day of battle.

"The *Second Army*, similarly, had taken the First Position, but "at night it also was essentially still in front of the Second Position ; "only its left wing had succeeded in breaking into this (Maissemy).

"The *Eighteenth Army* had gained considerably more ground, "quite corresponding to the tactical expectations formed during "the period of preparation."

The *Militär Wochenblatt* proceeds : "actually on the 21st, German "O.H.L. let its basic strategic idea drop into the background, "not being able to believe with full confidence in the possible success "of this idea . . . it sent no fresh forces to the heavily engaged "Seventeenth Army, which had hitherto been regarded as the "strategic pivot, whilst to the *Eighteenth Army*, or its *Group*, it "assigned in the course of the first day's fighting no less than six "new divisions, although this *Army* was already the best provided "with reserves".

This new distribution of the instrument by which alone he could influence the battle was made by Ludendorff in order to be ready to take the offensive against any French reserves which might appear; but as they did not do so for some days, the additional divisions were available to increase the numerical superiority opposite the British Fifth Army and augment its difficulties.

The infiltration tactics of the German infantry were eminently suited to the nature of the British defence, but were certainly favoured by the mistiness of the morning. The men of the advanced groups had rifles slung and made no attempt to use them, trusting to

the stick bombs with which they were well provided. When they reached a trench they hurled their bombs and at once jumped in to settle the defenders with club or bayonet. The next parties pushed on through the gaps and then came others to deal with the centres of resistance by means of machine guns, flame projectors, trench mortars and field guns, and, in some instances, tanks. When the fog lifted the rearmost lines were exposed to view in masses, moving in column or forming up for attack, and these suffered heavily.

The German casualties have not yet been made public. British prisoners saw masses of German dead being removed tied together in bundles ; they heard from German medical officers that there were three times the number of wounded for which they had been ordered to prepare, and that there was a general opinion that the casualties were much too heavy for the offensive to succeed.

Another matter of interest noticed by prisoners was that every kind of vehicle seemed to have been impressed for transport purposes : farm carts, carriages and small traps, even cars drawn by dogs. The horses seen were in very poor condition, even those of the cavalry "looked like a collection of old cab horses".

## CHAPTER XI

### THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

22ND MARCH 1918

#### FIFTH ARMY

(Maps 4, 5, 6 ; Sketches 4, 15, 16)

THE German operations on this day, which was fine but cold, were mainly directed towards securing bridge-heads on the Crozat canal and preparing to pinch out the Flesquieres Salient.

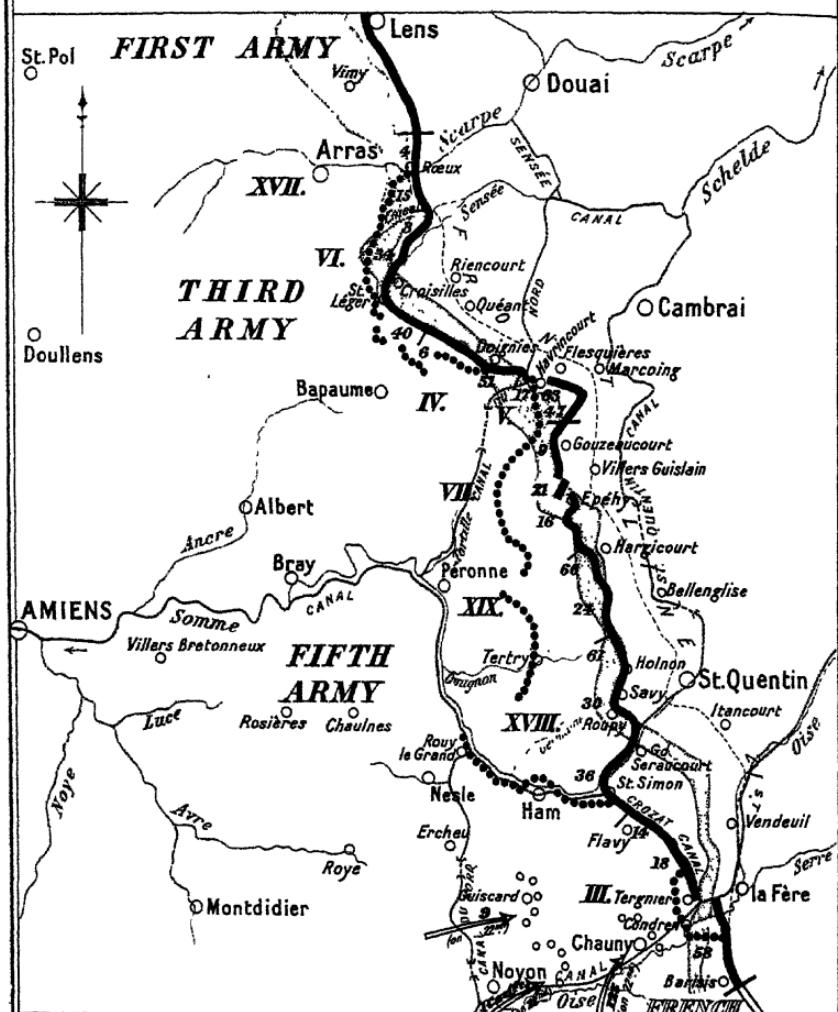
The fog which had begun to form about midnight of the 21st/22nd March continued to veil the battlefield until well into the morning of the 22nd ; but it cleared earlier than on the previous day, though in much the same manner. On the low ground near the rivers in the Fifth Army area it persisted until at least 11 A.M., whilst elsewhere on the higher levels it is reported as having begun to dissipate at 8 A.M., 9 A.M., 9.30 A.M. and 10 A.M. The impossibility of observation in the early hours hardly delayed the Germans, except in the extreme south, where the fog was thickest and lasted longest ; but it did have the result that their attacks on the various parts of the line took place at different times, instead of simultaneously. Although the fog prevented them from discovering the distribution of the British, it enabled them to push machine guns and trench mortars unseen right up into the front line, and to mass troops for attack without exposure to observed artillery fire ; and so to reap full advantage from their superiority in numbers over the fewer and battered British divisions.

**Map 4.** Owing to the large re-entrant which had been formed  
**Sketch 15.** therein, the total front held by the Fifth Army, exclusive of the portion south of the Oise, was now over forty miles in length, four miles longer than it had been twenty-four hours earlier. It was held by three dismounted brigades and



Sketch 15.

## 22<sup>ND</sup> MARCH.



### REFERENCE.

Line 22 <sup>nd</sup> March.....	—	23 <sup>rd</sup> March a.m.....	British, French.
Army boundaries.....	—	Corps boundaries.....	
Battle zone.....	—		

Miles 0 10 20 Miles.

Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch)

eleven divisions, all of which had suffered heavy casualties on the 21st, so that the divisions were below half their establishment of infantry, and consequently most unduly extended. The freshest units had been placed in the front line with the rest in a support position, which was the Green Line except in the case of the III. Corps and the right of the XVIII., whose fronts were already in that line, and of the VII. Corps, whose support line was in the rear trench of the Battle Zone, a switch joining it to the XIX. Corps supports in the Green Line on its right. In reserve were three divisions (less two brigades).

General Gough had already, on the afternoon of the 21st, discussed with his corps commanders the general policy to be followed in view of the smallness of the reserves and the unlikelihood of French aid materializing in sufficient strength for some days. His opinion was that if the Fifth Army fought to a finish on the ground on which it stood, there would be nothing to prevent the enemy breaking through on a broad front. A gradual and ordered retirement until reinforcements arrived appeared to be the only means of avoiding such a calamity. So at 6.30 A.M. on the 22nd he ordered that every opportunity should be taken to counter-attack the Germans, who would no doubt be assembling under cover of the fog ; and at 10.45 A.M., in order that there might be no misunderstanding, he put his policy into writing in a message which ran as follows :—

“ In the event of serious hostile attack corps will fight “ rear-guard actions back to forward line of Rear Zone “ [Green Line], and if necessary to rear line of Rear Zone.<sup>1</sup> “ Most important that corps should keep close touch with “ each other and carry out retirement in complete co- “ operation with each other and corps belonging to Armies “ on flanks.”

In the conversations held on the 21st, it had apparently been left to the corps commanders to decide whether or not an enemy attack should be regarded as serious, and to act independently, reporting their action ; but the Fifth Army diary, after giving the above message, continues : “ accord-

<sup>1</sup> This referred to the so-called “ Emergency line ”, existing only on paper, sited some 3,000-5,000 yards behind the Green Line. It started on the Oise near Chauny, crossed to the Somme near Ham, then ran along the western bank of that river to Péronne, and was doubled in front of the town by the Péronne bridgehead. From Péronne it ran north to Sailly-Saillisel on the boundary of the Third Army. In this Army it was known as the “ Red Line ” ; passing east of Bapaume, it bore north-westwards and north, and finally joined on to the Arras defences.

"ingly orders were issued as follows : III. Corps to stand "fast, XVIII. Corps to retire to the Somme and hold the "Ham defences, XIX. Corps to hold Péronne bridgehead, "VII. Corps to hold forward portion of Rear Zone". The Fifth Army order which contained these words, however, is actually timed 9.57 P.M. on the 22nd. In fixing the responsibility for the initiation of the retirements which were ordered by the XVIII. Corps during the day, the time of the receipt not of the order but of the preliminary message sent by telephone is of importance, but this cannot now be ascertained. Lieut.-General Maxse's written orders for retirement "to "the left bank of the Somme", of which no copy exists, were issued very early in the afternoon of the 22nd.<sup>1</sup> The telephoned version of these orders certainly reached his divisions before 12.30 P.M., and about this hour the XVIII. Corps received from the Fifth Army a message which seems to indicate that General Gough expected that the XVIII. Corps would be on the Somme line that night. It was to the effect that the French V. Corps was arriving at Noyon that evening at 6 P.M., and the French II. Cavalry Corps (dismounted) at the same place at midnight. The Somme line was to be held to enable time to be gained for these French troops to come up. There is certainly no doubt that soon after noon, if not earlier, the divisional commanders of the XVIII. Corps were all aware that a retirement to the Somme was contemplated, if not actually ordered, and that the knowledge of this intention had a vital influence on their appreciation of the situation. Thus it would seem that the XVIII. Corps orders of the afternoon (telephoned earlier) were issued on the basis of the second message from General Gough, which mentioned the French reinforcements, and the conditional order "in event of "serious hostile attacks . . . if necessary" (General Gough's 10.45 A.M. message) became transformed into an executive order for retirement.<sup>2</sup> Although the shifting of the corps and divisional headquarters had entirely upset the semi-permanent network of telegraph and telephone communications, the exertions made by the Signal Service were successful in maintaining throughout the day wire line connection—except when temporarily cut by enemy action—from Army to corps, corps to divisions and divisions

<sup>1</sup> "During the afternoon" according to the XVIII. Corps war diary, which gives a summary of them.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. General Gough's conversation with the commander of the VII. Corps, page 291.

to brigades ; consequently facilities were available for the commanders to consult and keep each other informed of events had they so chosen. Owing to the destruction of documents during the retreat, no record of any such conversations remains : not even a complete file of orders has survived.

The operations of the day will now be described. In general, a noteworthy stand was made by the British ; the enemy penetrated the front at very few places. It was only the exhaustion of the troops, the wholly inadequate numbers to deal with penetration by counter-attacking the invader, and the special success of local penetration against troops practically untrained in mobile warfare, which led to retirement being ordered.

### *III. Corps*

Three divisions of Lieut.-General Butler's III. Corps and two dismounted brigades of the 2nd Cavalry Division were engaged with their front along the Crozat canal, a flank being thrown back on the right to the Oise ; south of that river there were still five battalions of the 58th Divn.<sup>1</sup> The 20th Division, which when in G.H.Q. reserve had been behind the corps, was now on the XVIII. Corps front, but the 3rd Cavalry Division (6th, 7th and Canadian Cavalry Brigades) had been placed at III. Corps disposal at 3 P.M. on the previous day, and its brigades, dismounted, were moving to the corps area. There remained of the artillery, for the whole corps front, 157 field guns on a line roughly three thousand yards from the front line, and about 60 heavy guns, hidden in a series of valleys another three thousand yards further back, the guns on the southern bank of the Oise providing useful flanking fire.

During the day Lieut.-General Butler sent forward various small reinforcements which he had at his disposal : in the early morning 125 men of the 58th Division Signal School were moved to Condren on the Oise, and the 6th Dismounted Brigade, about half a battalion in strength, was sent to dig in on the Green Line in front of Noreuil ; about 1 P.M. the 5th Dismounted Brigade (the last of the 2nd Cavalry Division) was placed at the disposal of the 43rd Bde<sup>1</sup> and moved to a position of readiness south of Jussy ; at 2.30 P.M. the 7th Dismounted Brigade was

<sup>1</sup> This and subsequent similar abbreviations denote that the formation in question had been reduced by losses to a remnant. See page 216, f.n. 1.

placed at the disposal of the 18th Division and ordered to dig a support line ; at 3.45 P.M. the Canadian Cavalry Brigade was assigned as reserve to the 18th Division and allotted to the 54th Brigade ; finally at 4.15 P.M. the 18th Entrenching Battalion was handed over to the 14th Divn to guard its left flank.

The most important fighting took place on the right of the corps, where the enemy forced the passage of the Crozat canal on a two-mile front extending from Tergnier nearly to Liez.

The canal formed an appreciable obstacle, twenty to thirty yards wide, and was not fordable. Immediately south of Jussy it runs in a cutting for a short distance, but otherwise the adjacent ground is flat with cultivation extending right up to both banks. North of Jussy there is a stretch of swampy ground on the western bank, and in places a few narrow belts of wood on the opposite side. Like other river lines behind which armies have taken refuge, only to abandon them directly their passage was forced at one or more places, the canal had the drawback of not only marking clearly the defender's position, but, even without the fog, of acting as a bandage on his eyes by preventing patrols from crossing to find out what the enemy was doing. Such trenches and wire, too, as had been dug and put up proved to be badly sited, and from lack of time there were no dug-outs.

The early morning was comparatively quiet on the front held by the 58th Divn and 18th Division ; but when the mist cleared about 11 A.M. it could be seen that the enemy infantry was preparing for attack. The remnants of the 3/London, about three hundred strong, were therefore sent forward to reinforce the 8/London, which was holding 2,500 yards of front, including Tergnier and Quessy. Before this reinforcement arrived the Germans, after a short and furious bombardment by trench mortars, had advanced under a barrage of machine-gun fire. By about noon they had crossed the canal on the débris of the main road bridge between Tergnier and Fargniers, and had gained possession of a small bridgehead. The opportune appearance of the 3/London checked further progress, until machine guns of the 58th Battalion and of No. 1 Motor Machine Gun Battery put a stop to it ; in Tergnier severe fighting continued.

At Quessy, too, further north, the Germans managed to force a passage over the débris of the bridge about 1 P.M.,

after driving back the left company of the 8/London. Here they endeavoured to exploit their success on the western bank both to the right and to the left. To the south they could not make much progress, for the 8/London formed a defensive flank ; though the movement greatly embarrassed the defence of Tergnier. To the north, however, the enemy gradually overcame the resistance of the extreme left of the 8/London, and the right of the 12th Entrenching Battalion (18th Division), until by evening he had " rolled up " about a mile of the defences along the canal and railway line parallel to it. He also advanced about the same distance westwards towards the line (the Vouël Line) which was being dug on the high ground in front of the Green Line. To check further penetration, the 4th Dismounted Brigade, which had been ordered to take over the right sector of the 12th Entrenching Battalion, but had not completed the relief, was directed by the 18th Division to form a defensive flank, to face south-east and stretch from the Green Line, at a point about  $1\frac{3}{4}$  miles north-west of Tergnier, to the railway, at a point a mile north-west of Quessy. Fighting, with the units much intermixed, went on until evening in this quarter, where the 12th Entrenching Battalion recovered some of the lost ground ; but there was no general change in the situation. The crisis was brought about by events at Tergnier, where, in the end, numbers prevailed ; by about 7.30 P.M. Tergnier was lost, the remnants of the garrison falling back to the Vouël Line.<sup>1</sup> With a substantial bridgehead at Tergnier—Quessy in enemy possession the defence of the whole Crozat canal line was threatened.

Soon after 10 A.M., as the fog thinned, the enemy swept the front of the 54th Brigade, now forming the right of the 14th Divn next to the 18th, with trench-mortar and machine-gun fire, under cover of which his infantry crept up to the canal bank. No attempt, however, was made to cross until 6 P.M., when, under a heavy bombardment, a number of Germans rushed the undamaged Montagne railway bridge. The defending company of the 7/Bedfordshire was driven back, but, reinforced by two companies of the 6/Northamptonshire, it counter-attacked and re-took the bridge, capturing six machine guns and twenty

<sup>1</sup> Small parties of the 8/London, however, held out ; for, when a French counter-attack was made next morning (23rd), they assisted it by fire, and one post of this battalion resisted until 5 A.M. on the 24th.

prisoners. By 7.30 P.M. the situation was completely re-established.<sup>1</sup>

Further to the left, in Jussy, about 8 A.M., the enemy, advancing in close formation, attempted to cross by the débris of the bridges,<sup>2</sup> but was repulsed by the fire of the 9/Scottish Rifles, 5th Lancers and 8/Rifle Brigade, which held the canal bank. Here, covered by artillery, trench mortars and machine guns, the Germans made another attempt after dark about 8 P.M., which was equally unsuccessful ; but about 1 A.M. on the 23rd, in a third effort after a heavy bombardment, they<sup>3</sup> gained a footing on the British side of the canal westwards of Jussy, only to be driven back to the other side by a counter-attack of the men of the 5th Lancers, with "details", cooks and clerks of the 7/K.R.R.C. Major M. J. St. Aubyn of the latter regiment, who led it, was killed.

Thus, except for the loss of the Tergnier—Quessy sector on the right, where the enemy had secured a bridgehead, the line of the Crozat canal had been held by the III. Corps.

During the night a few reliefs were carried out, the 55th Brigade beginning to take over the whole front of the 18th Division from the Quessy—Vouël—Rouez road to Mennessis (inclusive). But this relief was not complete when the enemy attacked on the morning of the 23rd : in fact, the Germans were found by the relieving troops to be in possession of parts of the line supposed to be in British occupation.

The 54th Brigade was retransferred from the 14th Divn to the 18th Division at midnight, but remained in its old position. To assist the III. Corps, the 61st Brigade (20th Division), which had been sent to fill the gap between the III. and XVIII. Corps, was directed to side-slip a little to the right. Owing to heavy shelling this move was found to be impracticable, though in the evening the 9/Rifle Brigade from the reserve of the 41st Bde was sent to the left of the III. Corps front. At 9 P.M. Major-General W. H. Greenly, 2nd Cavalry Division, took over the command of the 14th

<sup>1</sup> 2nd-Lieut. A. C. Herring of the 6/Northamptonshire, in command of a post, was awarded the V.C. for his "splendid heroism, coupled with skilful handling of his troops".

<sup>2</sup> The German accounts leave no doubt as to the state of the bridges. "Bav. Regt. No. 1" states that "the men crossed by the remains of a bridge whose haunches were down in the water"; "Bav. Regt. No. 24" says that light bridges had to be constructed.

<sup>3</sup> 24th Bavarian Regiment and 5th Grenadiers.

Divn, which he exercised until the 27th, Br.-General T. T. Pitman leading the 2nd Cavalry Division in his place and continuing to do so until the end of the war.

About midday the infantry of the French 125th Division<sup>1</sup> began to arrive by lorry and motor, and General Diébold, the commander, set up his headquarters alongside those of the 58th Divn at Quiérzy (on the Oise 4 miles south-west of Chauny). He placed one of his regiments south of the Oise in Sinceny, another near Chauny, and the third a little to the north-east of his headquarters. By 3 P.M. his artillery had gone into position, one brigade south of the Oise, and the other two near Chauny. At 9 P.M. the 173rd Bde, the brigade of the 58th Divn north of the Oise, which had lost Tergnier, came under the orders of General Diébold. No other French troops reached the fighting area during the 22nd, when a counter-attack against the Germans who had crossed near Tergnier might have restored the situation. Towards 5 P.M. General Pellé (French V. Corps) reached Lieut.-General Butler's headquarters at Buchoire (7 miles north-west of Chauny), and stated that his divisions would arrive next day. On the assumption that the enemy would not gain much more ground, it was arranged that the 18th Division should be relieved by the French 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division, and the 14th Divn by the French 9th Division on the night of the 23rd/24th, and so the whole of the III. Corps area, the 58th Divn with it, would pass into French hands.

### XVIII. Corps

The operations of the 21st had left Lieut.-General Maxse with a reserve composed of the 59th and 60th Brigades (20th Division), and one battalion of the 89th Brigade (30th Division), disposed on the Green Line. The front of the corps was covered by 213 field and 67 heavy guns. As a result of the German Crown Prince's orders that the Tertiary road should be reached, which involved the seizure

<sup>1</sup> This division was in G.Q.G. reserve in the French Sixth Army area on the right of the British. On the evening of the 21st, Lieut.-General Butler had asked General Duchêne (Sixth Army) for the assistance of a couple of battalions at Tergnier, and the latter, having no reserves of his own, asked the G.A.N. for permission to use the 125th. At 1.15 A.M. on the 22nd, the division was placed by General Pétain at General Duchêne's entire disposal, with the sole condition that it was not to be placed under British command without his authorization. It was at once "alarmed" and despatched by march and in lorries to Chauny.

of the Holnon plateau, a very heavy attack was made on the 36th, 30th and 61st Divisions, the two latter still holding the front of the Battle Zone. It fell most heavily on the left (north) near the Omignon valley<sup>1</sup> where notwithstanding the fog, a bombardment was begun before daylight, as the position of the trenches was well known to the enemy.

In the meantime the retirement of the III. Corps to the Crozat canal had resulted in the 36th Division being left in a sharp salient, the apex of which was Fontaine les Clercs. The northern face of this salient, the front line of the Battle Zone, which extended to Roupy, was held by the 1/R. Inniskilling Fusiliers, and the 2/Green Howards and 19/King's of the 30th Division, whilst its southern face along the Somme formed the main front of the 36th Division. The bombardment at first affected only the northern face. At dawn the Germans made a small attack, which was repulsed by the 19/King's, but about 10 A.M. they again advanced, when a rift in the fog revealed large bodies of them in close order. Against the Roupy sector they failed to gain any advantage, and after an unsuccessful repetition of the attack about noon, the ground was reported to be strewn with "field-greys". Some Germans, however, about 11 A.M. managed to penetrate one of the gaps in the line west of Fontaine les Clercs, and, working round the left of the 1/R. Inniskilling Fusiliers, they isolated the defenders and forced them to retire to "Ricardo" "Redoubt", a large enclosed work in the rear line of the Battle Zone, in which battalion headquarters were stationed. But, in spite of the field artillery bombardment and repeated infantry attacks, the Ulstermen held out until 4.40 P.M.<sup>2</sup>.

The success at Fontaine les Clercs enabled the enemy to threaten the flank of the 36th Division line which lay along the Somme, and was already being attacked by fire in front. Major-General Nugent nevertheless decided to fight the battle out; but shortly before 1 P.M. he—in common with the other divisional commanders—received instructions from the XVIII. Corps that by Fifth Army order the corps was to fight a rear-guard action back to the Green Line and to the Somme. The battalions of the 107th and 109th Brigades were therefore gradually withdrawn west-

<sup>1</sup> The attack was made by ten divisions of the German IX. and III. Corps.

<sup>2</sup> It was captured at that hour by the 3rd Foot Guard Regiment.

ward to the Green Line between Happencourt and Fluquières, greatly assisted in their retirement by the prolonged resistance of the Ricardo Redoubt. The Green Line was found to be already occupied thickly by the 60th Brigade (20th Division), and for some time the three brigades were intermixed, suffering some loss from lack of cover in the shallow trenches. To make matters worse, shortly after the Ulster brigades had come in, two German aeroplanes appeared and machine-gunned the trenches, and later directed artillery fire on them.

The 108th and 61st Brigades, along the river line further south between St. Simon and Happencourt, were not attacked from the east, and remained in position.

Meantime, in the 30th Division sector, after a bombardment directed by aeroplanes, a third attack had been made on Roupy between 2 and 3 P.M., and, after "very hard fighting",<sup>1</sup> the village and the defences near it were lost. The survivors of the garrison retired on "Stanley Redoubt", a defended locality around a group of houses immediately south-west of Roupy, in which were located the headquarters of the 2/Green Howards and 19/King's. Here a fresh stand, costing the enemy many casualties, was made until 5.15 P.M., when the survivors again fought their way through the encircling Germans, this time to the Green Line, where they joined the 12/Rifle Brigade of the 60th Brigade.

Further north, between Roupy and Savy, the 17/Manchester held off the enemy during the morning, but in the afternoon the front line was overwhelmed, and the three company keeps behind it were surrounded and captured. The battalion headquarters and reserve company in the Chateau de Pommery ("Goodman Redoubt"), on the rear edge of the Battle Zone, then checked the enemy and gave opportunity for the fragments of the battalion to reorganize; but they also were finally surrounded, for under a barrage of heavy machine-gun fire the Germans pushed on until they were lying practically shoulder to shoulder 50 yards from the wire. Ammunition began to run short, and at 6.20 P.M. what was left of the battalion broke through the ring and reached the Green Line, where little more than a hundred survivors assembled.

In the Savy sector attacks had been made on the 90th Brigade at practically the same time and in the same manner as against Roupy. Here the Germans entered the

<sup>1</sup> "Regt. No. 53."

front line of the Battle Zone, only to be driven back into Savy. But in another attack at 2 P.M. they captured the whole of the front line, where the garrison, after making six local counter-attacks, fell back on "Stevens Redoubt", the headquarters of the 2/Bedfordshire, in the rear portion of the Battle Zone north of Etreillers. Here, reinforced by two companies of the 18/King's, the survivors continued to resist; but, just when ammunition began to fail, orders were received from brigade headquarters for a retirement on Ham, on the Somme, through the 20th Division in the Green Line. The withdrawal of the Bedfordshire from contact with the enemy was only accomplished at considerable cost. The 2/R. Scots Fusiliers, less heavily engaged, was able to evacuate Etreillers more easily. Thus, towards 5 P.M.,<sup>1</sup> the 30th Division, like the 36th, was in and behind the Green Line.

In the 61st Division sector, as elsewhere on the XVIII. Corps front, early attacks were launched between 8 and 10 A.M., after a bombardment; these were delivered mainly from the Omignon valley against the left, held by the 1/8th Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders (183rd Brigade) with two companies of the 2/4th Royal Berkshire, intermixed, and soon to be reinforced by the rest of the latter battalion. All attacks were repulsed, so that the defenders seemed likely to hold their own, when about 12.30 P.M. there arrived an order for a retirement to the Green Line. Guns and ammunition were got away, the artillery, with a party of the Berkshire, fighting for and recovering four 18-pdrs. lost on the previous day. Then, about 3 P.M., the withdrawal was begun deliberately, covered by rear guards and posts left out to assist the left flank which held the Germans at bay, until by 5 P.M. the 183rd Brigade was established on the Green Line, four miles in rear, where no trenches had been dug.

On the 184th Brigade front, next to the south, in the northern half of Holnon Wood, no frontal attack was made; but part of the enemy who attacked the 183rd broke through near the junction of the two brigades and began to advance southwards through the wood. A defensive flank was formed and the enemy was held off until at 2 P.M. the retirement ordered by the XVIII. Corps was begun. A difficult rear-guard action through the wood and over the open ground behind it was then fought in contact with the enemy

<sup>1</sup> The 30th Division account makes it later, about 6 P.M., and the 20th Division accounts earlier, towards 4 P.M.

back to the Green Line. The Germans followed closely in large numbers, and pressed their attacks against the 184th Brigade in its new position. The 182nd Brigade, in the southern part of Holnon Wood, was not attacked by infantry, and commenced its withdrawal a little earlier than the 184th, the Germans then coming on and trying to work round the right (southern) flank. But at dusk they began to relax their efforts and were observed to be digging themselves in for the night. This retirement of the 61st Division entailed heavy losses, and it seems that it might have been less costly had the division been allowed to hold its position until dark, as indeed appeared quite feasible to the officers of the battalions.

Thus by 5 p.m. the whole of the XVIII. Corps—except its extreme right, the 108th Brigade, along the Somme from the III. Corps boundary to Happencourt—had retired from the front of the Battle Zone to the Green Line. But the stay there was only to be temporary. Lieut.-General Maxse, about midday, had come to the conclusion that his battalions could not hold on where they were against continuous and persistent attacks without eventually being overwhelmed, and that the further withdrawal behind the Somme, at least foreshadowed by General Gough, had become necessary. He was influenced by the facts that the Green Line was not organized for defence, that the trenches had, at best, been dug only a few inches deep, and that entrenching tools were very scarce. Moreover, the corps front had been lengthened by the first retirement from 16,000 to 21,000 yards; the troops had been engaged since the early morning of the 21st in nearly continuous fighting against enormous odds; losses had been heavy; and the battle might last many days.

"During the afternoon",<sup>1</sup> orders were, therefore, issued by the XVIII. Corps for a withdrawal on the night of the 22nd/23rd "to the left bank of the Somme. The 61st and "30th Divisions were to pass through the 20th Division on "the line Bray St. Christophe—Douilly—Lanchy [respectively, 4 miles north-east, 3½ miles north and 6 miles north "of Ham],<sup>2</sup> the 20th Division with two brigades (the 59th

<sup>1</sup> So runs the XVIII. Corps General Staff war diary, but the warning order by telephone appears to have reached the divisions about 12.30 p.m. The order is missing.

<sup>2</sup> The line Bray St. Christophe—Douilly—Croix Molignaux, parallel to the Somme and about 3 miles from it, was actually taken up, owing to the existence of some old French trenches.

" and 60th) thus acting as a rear guard along two-thirds of " the whole corps front. Owing to paucity of numbers on " such a front, the 20th Division could only be expected to " check a close pursuit by the Germans."

General Gough on learning of this order directed that the rear guards of the XVIII. Corps should hold as long as possible a line running north-westwards from Ham through Toulle and Matigny to Croix Molignaux, so as to join up with the right of the XIX. Corps at Guizancourt and form the right of the bridgehead covering Péronne. The latter should thus be maintained, though the exact spot where the right met the Somme might vary according to the progress of the fighting. The enemy, however, began to follow so closely that no measures were taken by the XVIII. Corps to carry out the Fifth Army orders, which, as far as can be discovered, were not communicated to its divisional commanders ; consequently the 20th Division acted merely as a rear guard, made no effort to hold a line as the right of the Péronne bridgehead and eventually crossed the Somme.

The 21st and 23rd Entrenching Battalions were at once sent back to occupy and entrench the Somme line. The G.O.C. 89th Brigade, whose battalions had been lent to other formations, was directed to take over the defence of Ham with the three field companies R.E. of the 30th Division, A, E and H Gas Companies, and some details of the Corps Reinforcement Camp, until his own battalions should be returned to him ; this took place between midnight and 2 A.M. on the 23rd. The following fronts, with responsibility for destroying the road bridges over the Somme in them, were allotted : 36th Division, junction with III. Corps on Crozat canal to Sommette Eaucourt ; 30th Division, thence to Canizy ; 61st (which was relieved in the early morning of the 23rd by the 20th and went into reserve), thence to a point half-way between Voyennes and Béthen-court, a limit afterwards extended to include the last-named place.

The order for a withdrawal of the divisions of the XVIII. Corps behind the Somme very naturally gave the troops the impression that the situation must be desperate on the front of some other corps. Officers clamoured for information. "Where have the Germans broken through?"

"Is it true that they are across the Somme ?" they asked repeatedly, not understanding the orders ; for once contact with the enemy had been broken in the 36th and 30th

Divisions, the rear parties were being followed up by no more than a few patrols.

The 36th Division experienced no difficulty in withdrawing. The 108th Brigade, on the right, began to move at 3.30 P.M., and was in its new position by 10 P.M.; the 107th by 10.45 P.M.; the 109th by 1 A.M. on the 23rd. The 12/King's, the left battalion of the 61st Brigade, which was filling the gap between the III. and XVIII. Corps, was still in position at 9 P.M.; but soon after this hour its left company, which was still holding Tugny in the angle between the St. Quentin canal and the Somme, was driven out, and the whole battalion then withdrew south of the Somme through Ollézy, where rested the left flank of the remainder of the brigade. The thirteen bridges over the Somme and its accompanying canal in the 36th Division sector were then successfully demolished by parties of the 150th and 121st Field Companies R.E. by means of charges, or set on fire, the work in some cases not being completed until 9 or 10 A.M. on the 23rd.<sup>1</sup> Soon after midnight, it was discovered that nothing had been done at the standard gauge railway bridge at Pithon, just east of Ham, for which French engineers were responsible, and a party of the 121st Field Company R.E. was despatched to render it useless in any way possible; but as the party was never heard of again, there is no record of what it achieved.<sup>2</sup>

Touch not being established with the 30th Division, the 21st Entrenching Battalion was allotted to the 36th Division to fill the gap between the two.

The 30th Division was actually fighting in the Battle Zone when it received the orders to withdraw through the Green Line to the Somme; so after falling back to the Green Line, as already narrated, the retirement was continued across the Somme under protection of the 60th Brigade (20th Division), without interference. The 89th Brigade, which was to be reassembled, and the 23rd Entrenching Battalion were detailed to hold the divisional line, while the

<sup>1</sup> There was not enough explosive to deal with the two light railway bridges at Sommette Eaucourt, two miles east of Ham, and though they were set on fire, they remained passable for infantry.

<sup>2</sup> Little, if any, damage, seems to have been done. From "No. 3 Foot Guard Regt." it appears that owing to machine-gun fire the Germans could not force their way across the bridge until the fog cleared about 11 A.M. on the 23rd. According to "No. 3 Guard Gren. Regt.", even at 2 P.M. there was difficulty in getting transport and artillery over the bridge, which was only "partially constructed": probably meaning that, as a railway bridge, it was not prepared for horsed vehicles.

21st and 90th Brigades were placed in reserve: the latter at Verlaines ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles south-west of Ham), and the former at Muille Vilette ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles south of Ham), subsequently moving to Esmery Hallon ( $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles south-west of Ham) by brigade instructions, as it had run out of ammunition.

The 61st Division experienced great difficulty in carrying out its withdrawal to the Somme, as the 59th Brigade (20th Division), which had been detailed to cover this movement, was not available. At 11 A.M., before the issue of the retirement order, it had been assembled by 20th Division order behind the 61st in the Foreste—Germaine area, some four miles S.S.W. of the centre of the Green Line. Thence it was to make a counter-attack south-eastwards if the enemy pressed back the 60th Brigade, whose right flank was giving cause for anxiety. By the same order only a skeleton force of two companies of infantry and eight machine guns had been left behind in the Green Line between Vaux and Villéveque. The 61st Division therefore fell back fighting, and about 5 P.M. the skeleton force of the 59th Brigade, finding both flanks in danger of envelopment, also retired.

On the right, the 182nd Brigade was heavily attacked by the pursuing Germans, and by 6 P.M., Vaux being already lost, its right and centre were driven out of their position. The brigade then fell back about two miles south-westward to the Foreste—Beauvois road, with its right on Foreste. There it made a stand until about 10 P.M., when divisional orders were received to continue the retirement. The right and centre came back past the right flank of the 59th Brigade and across the Somme at Offoy (3 miles west of Ham). The 2/6th R. Warwickshire, on the left, did not receive the orders and held its ground until 2.30 A.M. on the 23rd, when, reduced to eighty men and almost surrounded, it withdrew across the Somme at Voyennes.

In the centre of the 61st Division, the battalions of the 184th Brigade did not retire simultaneously. The 2/5th Gloucestershire, next to the 2/6th R. Warwickshire, like that unit, received no orders,<sup>1</sup> and remained with it. The 2/4th R. Berkshire fell back about half a mile in consequence

<sup>1</sup> Apparently none were sent to it, as at the time the brigade staff was disorganized; Br.-General Hon. R. White had been wounded, while the brigade major had fallen into the hands of the enemy—he escaped later. The losses of the 2/5th Gloucestershire on this day are not recorded, but were certainly heavy.

of a heavy attack about 5.30 P.M., but then maintained its position until midnight, when it received orders to retire on Voyennes, and did so. By the morning of the 23rd what remained of the 184th Brigade was collected in reserve a mile to the south of Nesle, and was directed to guard the canal bridges at Languevoisin, just east of Nesle, and throw out a defensive flank on the north towards that town.

The left of the 61st Division, the 183rd Brigade, near Villéveque was attacked by strong forces about 8 P.M., after a fifty-minute bombardment ; but it held its ground and repulsed the Germans. After it became clear that the line on the right had been broken, Br.-General A. H. Spooner issued orders at 11.30 P.M. for a withdrawal behind the Somme. The last unit crossed the river at Voyennes about 6 A.M. on the 23rd, and the brigade was sent into reserve at Nesle, arriving about 9 A.M.

It remains to relate the fortunes of the 60th and 59th Brigades of the 20th Division, which had been detailed as rear guard to the troops of the XVIII. Corps. The Germans rapidly followed up the retirement of the 36th and 30th Divisions from the Battle Zone and were soon attacking the thinly held front of the 60th Brigade in the Green Line almost before the 30th Division had left it, at the same time pushing down the valley of the Somme, past the eastern flank of the line. Severe fighting took place ; but, although the line was penetrated in places, the 6/Shropshire L.I., 12/Rifle Brigade (whose commanding officer, Lieut.-Colonel A. F. C. MacLachlan, was killed) and the 12/K.R.R.C., held their ground until about 7.30 P.M. Then, with parties of the enemy actually behind them, they gradually drew off to the next positions assigned to them three miles away : Bray St. Christophe—Aubigny—Villers St. Christophe. As their last and best target the Shropshire L.I. had a German column which was marching down the road from Happencourt, apparently under the impression that the fighting was over.

In the new position the 60th Brigade remained until 11 P.M., when the next stage of the retirement to the Somme was ordered by Br.-General F. J. Duncan. It was none too soon, for the Germans were already attacking when the movement began at midnight. Having secured Tugny, as related earlier, the enemy was able to turn the right of the 6/Shropshire L.I., which had been reinforced by two companies of the 11/Durham L.I. (Pioneers). He thus cut off two companies of the Shropshire ; one of these managed to

slip away in the fog, which again formed during the night, but the other, caught between two battalions, in front and in rear, was captured. After considerable losses, the rest of the companies retired across the Somme at Ham, although the Shropshire battalion headquarters, which made a last counter-attack, with difficulty reached the bridge-head at Pithon. The 12/Rifle Brigade and 12/K.R.R.C. fought rear-guard actions back to Ham and Offoy, respectively, the former stampeding a column of German transport on the Ham—St. Quentin road. By 6 A.M. on the 23rd the 60th Brigade was behind the river holding the line from Canizy to Voyennes (exclusive).

The 59th Brigade, which had been moved southward to Foreste (5 miles north of Ham) with a view to counter-attacking, at 5.30 P.M.—that is, before the 182nd Brigade arrived there—had been ordered forward to re-occupy its sector of the Green Line with a view to covering the retirement of the 61st Division. Owing to the enemy's rapid advance, this was found impossible, and between 6 and 7 P.M. Br.-General H. H. G. Hyslop moved the brigade to the second rear-guard position assigned to it between Douilly and Croix Molignaux, about three miles from the Somme, where it began to entrench. Enemy advanced parties came in touch with it about 9 P.M., but the 59th Brigade was not attacked, so between 2 and 3 A.M. on the 23rd, it retired across the Somme, and took position on the left of the 60th Brigade from Voyennes to Béthencourt (inclusive).

The bridges in the sectors of the 30th and 61st Divisions, prepared by the 1st Siege Company R.E., were fired by the R.E. parties of the 200th, 201st and 202nd Field Companies (20th Division) and brought down, except one over the canal just south of Ham on the Noyon road, which was left for the use of the garrison of the Ham bridgehead.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This, a temporary double lattice bridge of 84-foot span, taking the place of one destroyed by the Germans in 1917, crossed a lock, its under surface being only 6 feet above the level of the lock walls. It was fired at 8 A.M. on the 23rd just as the enemy was gaining a footing on it. The explosion cut the girders in the centre, but their shore ends stayed on the abutments and the hanging ends fell on the lock walls, so that the gap was small. As the enemy was getting very near, nothing more could be done.

Two of the bridges at Offoy in the 61st Division sector were on a deviation and difficult to destroy in a hurry; they were therefore fired by the 476th Field Company R.E. at 11 P.M.; the others, including four at Voyennes, were handed over to the 20th Division at 1 A.M. on 23rd, and the charges fired between that hour and 7 A.M. on the 23rd; later one of the five bridges at Béthencourt was found to be serviceable, and this was destroyed after dark on the 23rd by a party of the 1st Field Squadron R.E.

During the 22nd, fifteen heavy guns of the XVIII. Corps had been abandoned, mainly because, in spite of determined efforts of the A.S.C. drivers, their mechanical transport could not be brought up to them in time owing to the congestion of traffic on the roads and to heavy shelling. This made a total loss in the two days of battle of 43 heavy guns ; but the corps was not destined to lose any more. The arrangements for the replenishment of ammunition and supplies continued to work satisfactorily.

After the necessary reorganization had been accomplished, the distribution of the XVIII. Corps along the Somme was : 36th Division, with 61st Brigade (20th Division) attached, from III. Corps boundary ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles north-west of Jussy) to Ham (exclusive) ; 30th Division from Ham to Canizy (inclusive) ; and the 20th Division (less a brigade), thence to Béthencourt (inclusive) ; the 61st Division was in reserve, or moving into reserve, behind the 20th Division. The total frontage of the corps was now about fourteen miles. Corps headquarters moved at 2.30 P.M. from Ham to Nesle.

### *XIX. Corps*

On the morning of the 22nd the front line of the 24th and 66th Divisions formed a series of re-entrants and salients down the middle of the Battle Zone. Le Verguier was still holding out as a salient in the right centre, and "Trinket Redoubt" in the left centre. The night had been spent by the men in improving the defences and cleaning arms—without any necessity for encouragement from their officers. The general situation of the corps was good, and it had reserves close at hand. The 1st and part of the 2nd Dismounted Brigade were already fighting intermixed with the two divisions, but the 9th Dismounted Brigade was in reserve behind the 66th Division at Hervilly and Roisel, and the remainder of the 2nd at Le Mesnil. The 50th Division, which had detrained at Brie (5 miles south of Péronne) during the previous night, had by 8 A.M., or soon after that hour, disposed two brigades thinly along the whole length of the corps Green Line, with the third brigade concentrated on the left of it in the Cologne valley. The 5th Tank Battalion, now allotted to the corps, had at 6.30 A.M. arrived at Nobescourt Farm (6 miles east of Péronne), and the heavy artillery had been reinforced during the night by the XXI. and XXII. Brigades R.G.A.

from the reserve, which had been placed in rear of the Green Line. Of the three original heavy brigades, the LXXVI. stood on the right, near Caulaincourt and Terty, close behind the Green Line, and the XXIII. and LXVIII. on the left at Roisel, between the Battle Zone and the Green Line. The total number of heavy guns in the five brigades was 112, and 217 field guns were available.<sup>1</sup> The latter included nine guns of the 24th Division lost on the previous day, which had been recovered in the mist of the early morning by a party of 11th Hussars and artillerymen.<sup>2</sup>

Lieut.-General Sir H. E. Watts was fully informed as to General Gough's views, so when written confirmation of them arrived at 10.45 A.M. on the 22nd, he sent instructions to the divisional commanders to carry out a fighting withdrawal to the Green Line as soon as it should become evident that the Battle Zone position could no longer be held without danger of the capture of its defenders. From an early hour the corps was attacked all along its front.

In the 24th Division, the 72nd Brigade was attacked, in the mist, on both sides of the Omignon from 8.15 A.M. onwards without the Germans gaining any advantage. Against the right about 10 A.M. a particularly determined effort was made in several waves against a mixed detachment of two troops of the 5th Dragoon Guards, a company of the 8/R. West Kent and another of the 18/Middlesex (73rd Brigade), holding the rear defences of the Battle Zone west of Vaden-court; but the Germans were simply mown down by machine-gun and rifle fire. Nevertheless soon after 11 A.M. orders were received by Br.-General R. W. Morgan from divisional headquarters that, owing to pressure on both flanks—on the 61st Division and on the 17th Brigade at and near Le Verguier—it was necessary to retire to the Green Line; the 72nd Brigade would therefore retire fighting through the 50th Division, which was holding that line, and assemble on the Terty—Bouvincourt road, three miles behind and parallel to the line. At twelve noon the withdrawal was begun, much to the surprise of the troops, who were in the highest spirits and felt themselves quite capable

<sup>1</sup> On the 24th Division front, 93 : I and N Batteries R.H.A., A and B Canadian Horse Artillery, and XXIII., 106th, 107th and 251st Brigades R.F.A.; on the 66th Division front, 124 : G, H and Y Batteries R.H.A. and LXXXVI., 250th, 330th and 331st Brigades R.F.A.

<sup>2</sup> They also brought back some gramophones left in the dug-outs; these were distributed to the troops and were turned on during the subsequent German attacks.

of holding off any attack. The 11th Hussars, 13/Middlesex (73rd Brigade) and 19th Entrenching Battalion covered the retirement. They fought a continuous rear-guard action, but the last parties did not leave their position until about 2 P.M., after the engineers had blown up three bridges over the Omignon to prevent any attack on the right flank, now exposed by the withdrawal of the 61st Division. In spite of its success, the movement, being carried out by daylight, naturally brought the 72nd Brigade somewhat heavy losses.

In the 17th Brigade sector the Germans renewed their assault on Le Verguier<sup>1</sup> in the mist and darkness at 4 A.M. Five battalions converged on the village from north, east and south, covered, after 9.30 A.M., by the guns of the *4th Guard* and *208th Divisions*, which had ranged on the village during the previous evening. Under Lieut.-Colonel H. J. C. Peirs, the 8/Queen's and part of the 24th Machine Gun Battalion made a desperate defence. The frontal attack from the east failed entirely, being detected and dealt with by an outlying party. It was not until about 9.30 A.M. that the *5th Foot Guard Regiment* succeeded in penetrating on the north; it then took in rear the defenders of the eastern face, and the *208th Division* broke in on that side. "Fort Lees" and "Fort Greathead", in the western outskirts, still held out, assisted by the fire of men from the lost defences, of battalion headquarters and of "details," delivered from a sunken road south-east of the village. Then Fort Lees fell, just as Lieut.-Colonel Peirs was about to reach it, and so to save from capture the remnant of the 8/Queen's and the machine gunners, he withdrew the survivors about 10.15 A.M., under cover of the mist, after collecting the garrison of Fort Greathead in another sunken road to the south-west of the village. With only one further casualty, the party managed to reach the Le Verguier Switch, south of the village, which was still held. According to the German programme, Le Verguier should have been captured twenty-four hours earlier, at 10 A.M. on the 21st, but to take it proved "a stiff task".<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The defences of Le Verguier consisted of 7 platoon and 2 half-platoon redoubts or forts on a front of 1,000 yards and a depth of 700, so as to form a rough triangle, with machine-gun positions interspersed among them, arranged to cover the front and northern flank. There were outlying small posts in strips of wood on the eastern side. The platoons averaged only thirty strong, but were reinforced by survivors of the two companies which had been in the Forward Zone.

<sup>2</sup> Thus the history of the *4th Guard Division*. The account in Goes, p. 76, ending "the German machine guns shrieked after masses of Englishmen who fled towards Jeancourt [west of Le Verguier]", is untrue. The

Meanwhile, the other units of the 17th Brigade (1/R. Fusiliers and 3/Rifle Brigade, and 17th Light Trench Mortar Battery), with the 104th Field Company R.E., in the Le Verguier Switch, had repulsed all attacks; in the mist British rifles proved far more effective than the enemy machine guns. Fifteen hundred shells were expended by the trench mortars; some were thrown by hand at times, as the fighting came to very close quarters. At 11.15 A.M. the divisional orders for withdrawal to the Green Line reached Br.-General P. V. P. Stone, at the moment brigade headquarters were taking up position to fight it out. The retirement was begun by battalions soon after midday. As they were in contact with the enemy, they found it no easy task, and then, for the first time, the Germans broke into the defences. But it was not until between 1.30 and 2 P.M. that the rear parties (the 104th Field Company R.E., one company of the 1/R. Fusiliers and machine guns of the 24th Machine Gun Battalion) moved away. Their retirement through the rear line of the Battle Zone was covered by the 7/Northamptonshire. The 17th and 72nd Brigades were finally re-assembled behind the right of the Green Line north of Monchy Lagache.

In spite of the mist, the front of the 66th Division in the Battle Zone was heavily bombarded from 4 A.M. to 7 A.M., whilst at the same time attempts were made to cut the wire. Then till 10 A.M. followed attacks which gradually drove the defenders back to the rear line of the Battle Zone. Isolated posts, however, continued to hold out: Carpeza Copse, garrisoned by two companies of the 2/6th Manchester, part of the 2nd Dismounted Brigade and some pioneers, fought until 11 A.M., when, surrounded on three sides, its defenders managed to escape. The two adjacent companies of the 9/Manchester did the same, but being completely surrounded, they could not get clear until 2.30 P.M. Trinket Redoubt, garrisoned by a company of the 9/R. Sussex (of the 78rd Brigade, 24th Division), most of whose men were dispersed in four redoubts in the Battle Zone, was not captured until 2 P.M., after it had been entirely surrounded for three hours. On the extreme left, however, the 197th Brigade, holding the sunken road south of Templeux le Guérard, with an open left flank—the right

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facts are that a very weak battalion with some machine guns held up two German divisions for some hours and then slipped away unmolested.

of the 16th Divn next to it was some way back and on the other side of the Cologne valley—was quickly over-powered and driven to the last line of the Battle Zone. Following fast, the enemy captured a mile-length of this line north of Hesbécourt about 9 A.M., although the reserve company of the 9/R. Sussex continued to defend the village itself. Small parties of the brigade then clung on to tactical points behind a line of wire in front of Roisel, and checked any further advance.

As soon as the 197th Brigade was seen falling back, Major-General N. Malcolm tried to initiate counter-attacks in order to restore the situation and to meet the danger which was obviously most threatening from the north. But the runners carrying his orders to the 15th Entrenching Battalion, near Nobescourt Farm, could not find it ; the 15th Hussars (9th Dismounted Brigade) at Roisel, which were also detailed for this task, had to use one squadron to meet Germans nearing the village from the north, while the others could do no more than help to hold in check the enemy in front of the village. To meet the emergency, the 1/5th Durham L.I. (of the 151st Brigade, 50th Division), on the Green Line in rear, was ordered up to Roisel. By about 11 A.M. the enemy, assisted by one tank, which soon retired, had entered Hervilly Wood to the south-west of Hesbécourt, having overwhelmed two posts of the 8th Hussars near by ; they brought two machine guns into action forty or fifty yards away to enfilade the R. Sussex company in that village, killing many of the defenders as they lay flat in their shattered trenches. The position becoming untenable, the remnants of the 9/R. Sussex were withdrawn fighting to the Green Line south of Nobescourt Farm : the whole battalion numbered only 120 at evening roll call.<sup>1</sup>

The 9th Dismounted Brigade (now consisting of the 19th Hussars and the remainder of the 8th Hussars), then near Hervilly, with six tanks of the 5th Tank Battalion, was ordered to counter-attack northward, assembling at Bois de la Croix, south of Hervilly. About 12 noon the cavalry-men advanced, and, although the tanks were incapacitated at an early stage,<sup>2</sup> they retook part of Hervilly Wood, and

<sup>1</sup> "Fire spouting Hesbécourt" was attacked by three battalions of the 1st Division (from the second line), a battery and a bombing squadron, according to Goes, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> Cavalry officers report having seen three tanks ; enemy accounts mention four as having been accounted for by machine guns and others by rifles of the 43rd Regiment of the 1st Division. But they mention a

drove the enemy back into Hesbécourt, thus for a time bringing a dangerous advance to a halt.<sup>1</sup>

At midday, therefore, the 66th Division still held the rear line of the Battle Zone as far north as Hervilly Wood. Beyond the wood it stood only a short distance behind that line and was holding the enemy in check ; the right was secured by the 24th Division. The danger lay on the left from the Cologne valley, which had been so strongly attacked, that the covering troops, both of the 66th and of the 16th Divn were driven back, and the enemy began to work down the valley.

On receiving the report from the 24th Division that its retirement was about to begin, Lieut.-General Watts, at 12.50 P.M., ordered the 66th to conform and to retire fighting through the 50th Division. The behaviour of the Germans on different parts of the front varied. On some parts they permitted troops to walk back across the open undisturbed, being too tired to follow ; on others, they endeavoured to sweep forward in large numbers. In the rear-guard actions which ensued heavy casualties were inflicted on the enemy ; but some forty men of the 15th Hussars and the remnants of two companies of the 2/6th Lancashire Fusiliers were cut off and the fifteen unwounded survivors captured.

By 2 P.M., therefore, the 24th and 66th Divisions, and the dismounted cavalry with them, were in the course of retiring from the Battle Zone. It had been Lieut.-General Watts's intention that they should rest and re-organize behind the Green Line under the protection of the 50th Division, with which their artillery remained. But this was not to be. It will be recalled that the Green Line, much of which was on forward slopes, exposed, but with a good field of fire, had been dug only to the depth of a foot and that its wire was negligible. The battalions and companies of the 50th Division, spread out along eight miles of front that very morning, could not do much to improve the defences before 3.30 P.M. By that hour the 24th and 66th Divisions and brigades of the 1st Dismounted Division had passed

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second tank attack later in the day dealt with by fire from captured guns, which seems to be the counter-attack mentioned in the text.

<sup>1</sup> By a fortunate coincidence, Major-General Mullens of the 1st Cavalry Division had studied this counter-attack at a staff exercise, in which the commander of the 9th Dismounted Brigade took part, only two days earlier. He also forecast that higher authority would break up his division, as it did.

through, and the enemy could be seen advancing. By 4.30 P.M. the 149th Brigade (1/4th and 1/6th Northumberland Fusiliers in front and 1/5th in reserve), which was on the right, on the spur north of the Omignon in front of Caulaincourt, was heavily attacked, and the enemy, coming on in eight waves down the Omignon valley, broke in on the right front. A desperate resistance was offered, every available man being put into the fight, and two counter-attacks were made; yet by 6 P.M. Caulaincourt was definitely lost and the right of the brigade driven back. A defensive flank had then to be formed on the front of the woods outside Caulaincourt north-eastward along the Poeuilly spur and in front of the village of that name, where the left still stood fast.

The 150th Brigade, in the centre, was not attacked until 5.30 P.M. Here, either because the ground was open and practically flat and artillery support so much easier that severe losses could be inflicted on the Germans, or because their assault was less fierce, the enemy gained no advantage except the capture of a few trenches from the 1/4th Green Howards in front of the ruins of Nobescourt Farm at the junction with the 151st Brigade, where Lieut.-Colonel B. H. Charlton was killed. The site of the farm remained in the hands of the battalion headquarters and details of the 1/5th Durham L.I. of the 151st Brigade; the Germans made no attempt to press their success, so that with the help of reserves a new line was formed.

On the left, the 1/5th Durham L.I., which had been sent forward towards Roisel to support the 66th Division, retired with it. Thus, when the enemy attacked, all three battalions of the 151st Brigade were in the line, and finding a good field of fire and being well supported by the artillery, they had no difficulty in holding their ground.

As a whole, therefore, the 50th Division had well maintained its position, in spite of the men having witnessed the depressing sight of the infantry of the 24th and 66th Divisions, hard hit by fighting, passing through their ranks. Shortly before 8 P.M., however, Br.-General A. U. Stockley, temporarily commanding the 50th Division, came to the opinion that Nobescourt Farm had been lost as well as Caulaincourt; at the same time he also received a somewhat pessimistic account of the state of the infantry from one of the divisional General Staff. Accordingly he reported the situation to the XIX. Corps, and asked permission to disengage from the Green Line and its slight

defences, which were bound to be overwhelmed next morning, with a view to retiring two miles to the line Monchy Lagache — Vraignes — Beaumetz — Brusle, previously selected as part of the Péronne bridgehead. This position had an excellent field of fire over nearly flat ground, and good observation from the Bouvincourt Knoll inside it, while, being convex in trace towards the enemy, its flanks were fairly secure. Lieut.-General Watts had by this time heard from Lieut.-General Maxse that the front of the XVIII. Corps on the Green Line had been broken in several places, and that its divisions were in the act of retiring behind the Somme ; he therefore gave his sanction by telephone for the retirement of the 50th Division. It was clearly the best course, in the event of the general retirement being continued until reinforcements arrived, to hold on by day and slip away during the night. The whole of the heavy artillery was then ordered back, and during the night its five brigades crossed the Somme and got into position west of the river.

The retirement of the 50th Division entailed a further rearward march for the 1st Cavalry, the 24th and the 66th Divisions, instead of the rest which they had been promised. At 8 P.M. the XIX. Corps issued the following order :—

The 1st Cavalry Division to occupy a position Athies—Le Mesnil ( $5\frac{1}{2}$  miles and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles S.S.E. of Péronne), in support of the 50th Division, four miles behind its new line.

The 66th Division to continue the retirement to a position behind the Somme from Eterpigny to La Chapellette ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  and 1 mile south of Péronne respectively).

When later in the night—the message was received at 3.15 A.M.—General Watts heard that the XVIII. Corps had retired behind the Somme, he ordered the 24th Division, which had concentrated by evening around Monchy Lagache covered by the 72nd Brigade, to prolong and protect the right flank of the new position of the 50th Division by occupying the line Guizancourt—Monchy Lagache. This left a gap of four miles, which according to General Gough's directions should have been covered by the XVIII. Corps, between the left of that corps at Béthen-court and the right of the XIX. Corps. It was hoped that the 8th Division, from G.H.Q. reserve, allotted at 1 P.M. to the XIX. Corps, and then moving by rail from St. Omer to Nesle, Chaulnes and Rosières (stations between Ham and Amiens), would arrive on the 23rd to fill this space, and thus hold the right of the Péronne bridgehead.

The 24th Division was very short of small arm ammunition, as its supplies were seriously depleted, but fortunately the battalion wagons which had been sent back were able to find ammunition dumps and were successful in charging through some Germans who tried to prevent their return.

At 10.40 P.M. the 50th Division issued orders for the withdrawal to the Monchy Lagache—Brusle line. This was carried out, as was normally done in fog and darkness during those days of March, by compass, in lines of companies in column of fours, under protection of a fan of infantry and parties with Lewis guns; there was no interference from the Germans, who were in fact engaged in digging new trenches preparatory to an assault at dawn. The new line was a good one, but had unfortunately been selected without reference to the VII. Corps, whose right flank that night was 1½ miles to the east of Brusle, at Tin-court. It was not until 4 A.M. on the 23rd that Lieut.-General Congreve heard from Lieut.-General Watts that the XIX. Corps had retired; for the routine of the latter's headquarters had been upset, about 9 P.M., by a German aeroplane, which dropped three bombs on it, obtaining a direct hit on the General Staff office, killing the G.S.O.2 and causing many casualties, while the Chief General Staff officer, Br.-General C. N. Macmullen, though not wounded, received a shock, the effect of which was not without influence on the fortunes of the corps during the next few days.

Only three field guns were lost by the XIX. Corps during the 22nd, making a total of 62 for the two days' fighting. The retirement of the heavy artillery covering the Battle Zone to a position Athies—Cartigny, seven miles behind the Green Line, had been ordered; but again, owing to insufficient motor haulage, there was considerable delay in getting the guns away. Near Roisel nine guns had to be abandoned on the enemy opening machine-gun fire, whilst thirteen were similarly lost in other parts of the field, making a total of 38 for the 21st and the 22nd.

The withdrawal behind the Green Line had given an opportunity to re-assemble the units of the 1st Cavalry Division, which had been fighting dismounted among the infantry, scattered up and down the front of the 24th and 66th Divisions, where, as fully trained soldiers, they had rendered excellent service. At 1.40 P.M. the XIX. Corps had ordered their concentration in the Athies area, whither the horses were also sent, and this re-assembly, although all the many small detachments had not yet rejoined head-

quarters, had been all but completed by 7.30 P.M.<sup>1</sup> Thus, when the corps order, issued at 8 P.M., to dig in on the Athies—Le Mesnil line was received there was no difficulty in proceeding to carry it out, some of the horses being sent back over the Somme.

After passing through the 50th Division, the 66th Divn which had lost three-quarters of its fighting strength, began to concentrate in the valley of the Cologne east of Péronne between Buire and Doingt (known to the British Army as "Doing It") behind the left of the corps. On receipt of the 8 P.M. order just as the division was beginning to arrive in its billets, it continued the march and arrived in its new position behind the Somme about 3 A.M. Two brigades were detailed to hold the river line south of Péronne, between Eterpigny and La Chapellette, the third being held in reserve at Barleux, behind the right.

The 8th Division did not reach the line assigned to it and fill the gap between the XVIII. Corps and the 24th Division. When, between 8 and 9 P.M., the advanced parties of the 24th Brigade began to arrive on the line, they found Germans already in the billets they had hoped to secure, and had to fight their way back to the Somme. In consequence, at 11.30 P.M., Lieut.-General Watts cancelled his orders to the 8th Division and directed it to occupy the west bank of the Somme, from its confluence with the Ingou river (north-west of Voyennes) to Eterpigny—an 8-mile front.

The 24th Brigade, which did not complete detrainment at Nesle until 2 A.M. on the 23rd, was sent up in lorries and was the only part of the 8th Division in position, although it was not completely settled down even at dawn, 7 A.M. on the 23rd. At this hour, therefore,<sup>2</sup> two divisions of the XIX. Corps were still east of the Somme, in an isolated position, with neither flank in touch with the corps on the right and the left; the two other divisions and the heavy guns west of the Somme; and the 1st Cavalry Division near Athies between the two groups thus formed.

### *VII. Corps*

**Map 5.** On the 21st March the 16th Divn (with the 116th Brigade of the 39th Division attached) had been driven back to the rear line of the Battle Zone. The 21st Division still

<sup>1</sup> H and I Batteries R.H.A. remained with the 24th and 66th Divisions.

<sup>2</sup> Map 6, Sketch 16.

held Epéhy—Pezière in the front line of that zone, and had a right defensive flank, running back through the Battle Zone to Saulcourt, manned in case the 16th Divn should fail entirely. The 9th Division, which had hardly been attacked, had been withdrawn into the Battle Zone in order to conform with its right-hand neighbour. There were, however, several gaps of five hundred to a thousand yards in the 21st Division front. Behind the 16th Divn, the Green Line was occupied thinly by the 155th and 157th Field Companies R.E. and 17th Entrenching Battalion. The 118th and 117th Brigades with twelve tanks (4th Battalion) behind them, were dug in on a switch line running north-east, which connected with the Battle Zone just south of Saulcourt. Thence the rear line of the zone was held by five battalions of the 21st and 9th Divisions. The 9th Division still had an entire brigade available in rear of the Green Line. There were 246 field guns in action on the corps front,<sup>1</sup> and 107 heavy guns, fairly close to the Green Line; the V. Brigade R.G.A. was sent up from G.H.Q. reserve at Péronne, about 10 A.M. with 24 more heavy guns.

At 8.40 A.M. Lieut.-General Congreve, doubtful how far he should act on the general verbal instructions of the G.O.C. Fifth Army of the previous afternoon, enquired by telephone whether it was the latter's intention that the VII. Corps should retire on the Green Line. To this General Gough himself replied at 9.35 A.M. that the general policy should be to delay the enemy as much as possible, but not to fight a decisive battle; and that if a withdrawal became necessary it should not go beyond the Green Line. Lieut.-General Congreve pointed out that since the 16th Divn was already on the rear line of the Battle Zone, as a first step to further retirement the 21st and 9th Divisions should be brought back abreast of it; but that his left was dependent on the action of the divisions of the Third Army in the Flesquières Salient. He then informed his divisional commanders that a withdrawal to the Green Line was likely. The Fifth Army message of 10.45 A.M., putting General Gough's intentions into writing was not received until 11.15 A.M., and before this much had happened.

The thrust of the enemy infantry down the Cologne valley, after heavy bombardment, about 7 A.M. in the fog, which had carried away the left of the XIX. Corps, struck

<sup>1</sup> 16th Divn front, 90; 21st Division front, 60; 9th Division front, 96.

almost simultaneously the right of the VII. Corps, that is the 47th Bde of the 16th Divn. Assaulted in front and enfiladed from the right, the right battalion, the 2/Leinster, suffered heavy casualties ; and as the counter-attack of the 66th Divn was too late to afford any help, it fell back some five hundred yards from the rear edge of the Battle Zone. Here, reinforced by two companies of the 11/R. Sussex (116th Brigade), it held on until nearly 11 A.M., when it withdrew again, about  $1\frac{1}{4}$  miles to the railway north of Roisel.

Meanwhile the rest of the 16th Divn front, held by units of the 47th Bde and 116th Brigade, had been attacked ; no less than five distinct assaults were made on it between 7 A.M. and noon, all of which were repulsed with heavy loss to the enemy. But, passing through the gap made by the dropping back of the 2/Leinster, the Germans turned northwards and, advancing towards Ste. Emilie, threatened not only the flank and rear, but also the line of retirement of the 16th Divn, which was south-westwards.

At 11.10 A.M., therefore, Major-General Hull, with the concurrence of the corps commander, and in accordance with the Fifth Army policy, issued definite orders for the retirement of the 16th Divn to the Green Line. It was very difficult to break off an action in daylight when the troops were so closely engaged ; but the valley behind the position, in which ran the railway, gave facilities for carrying out the first stage of the operation without attracting much notice. After the repulse of the enemy's fifth assault, the 47th Bde and 116th Brigade began the retirement, a line of wire which had to be crossed behind Ste. Emilie causing some trouble to the latter brigade.<sup>1</sup> The artillery of the 16th Divn had been ordered to begin the withdrawal at 8.15 A.M., leaving the two brigades of the 39th Division to cover the movement. Successive positions were taken up by the 16th Divn, first on the Roisel—Epéhy railway and then on the high ground west of Villers Faucon, the Green Line between Hamel and Tincourt Wood being reached during the afternoon. The 1/1st Hertfordshire, the rear guard of the 116th Brigade, was heavily engaged, and suffered considerable casualties, although it was assisted by three tanks of the 4th Tank Battalion. These were all knocked out, but their appearance stopped the enemy's advance for some time.

<sup>1</sup> A retirement from the left was ordered ; the actual order did not reach the 116th Brigade until 2.10 P.M., but its units began withdrawal, seeing those on its right and left were on the move, soon after midday.

One of the companies of the Hertfordshire and a heavy gun on a railway mounting, which could not be moved as the line was broken, were cut off in Ste. Emilie, which, according to German accounts, was not taken until between 1 and 2 P.M., "after strong opposition".<sup>1</sup>

The order to retire did not reach the troops which were in the line astride the Ste. Emilie—Ronssoy road; these were a company each of the 1/R. Munster Fusiliers (47th Bde) and 13/R. Sussex (116th Brigade), with the survivors of the 6/Connaught Rangers (47th) in support. After repulsing repeated attacks they were completely surrounded; yet it was not until about 4 P.M., with numbers reduced and ammunition running out, that they were overwhelmed, after an attempt to break through had failed. The 186th Brigade R.F.A. remained in action until the Germans were within five hundred yards of it, and then got away successfully. But the teams of the 184th Brigade did not arrive in time, and it had to abandon sixteen guns; these continued firing until the infantry had passed through them, when the detachments retired under machine-gun fire, carrying off the breech blocks and sights.

In the sector of the 21st Division, where the 110th and 62nd Brigades stood in the front line and the 64th in reserve, the enemy directed his efforts against the double village Epéhy—Pezière in the front line of the Battle Zone, "the flood breaker" as German accounts call it. Pursuing his policy of making for key positions, he sent two divisions (*79th Reserve* and *183rd*) against it, without troubling much about the flanks thrown back on either side. Epéhy—Pezière, like other villages, was defended by a number of self-contained posts, Epéhy garrisoned by the 6th and 8/Leicestershire, with the 97th and 126th Field Companies R.E. on the right flank and the 7/Leicestershire in Pezière. After the same bombardment as elsewhere, about 8 A.M., in the fog, a German battalion managed to break in and surround some of the posts in the southern end of Epéhy, where a fierce struggle ensued. There was a buried cable, still intact, between the 110th Brigade headquarters and the 8/Leicestershire, and about 9.30 A.M., as the enemy seemed to be making his main effort on the southern part of Epéhy, the brigade ordered the two field companies and the 6th and 8/Leicestershire to retire from Epéhy village and form a defensive flank on the Saulcourt—Epéhy road.

<sup>1</sup> "Res. Regt. No. 230."

This line would link up on the left with the 7/Leicestershire, still holding Peizi re, and on the right join on to the Longavesnes—Saulcourt Switch, held by two brigades of the 39th Division. The withdrawal was carried out down the communication trenches as far as these went, but not without considerable losses, due to the enemy having machine guns trained on the exits of the trenches. Lieut.-Colonel W. N. Stewart of the 6/Leicestershire was killed. Of the two companies of the 7/Leicestershire which covered the retirement, only one officer and fourteen other ranks escaped being hit, and they were captured. It was not until past 1 P.M., "after heavy blood sacrifices", that the Germans entered Ep hy from both ends, and "stormed nest "after nest",<sup>1</sup> but their attempt to follow up the 110th Brigade was temporarily checked by a counter-attack, made south-west of the village by two tanks of the 4th Tank Battalion, which were both eventually knocked out by direct hits.

On the left wing of the 21st Division, the 62nd Brigade had repulsed the enemy's attacks, which were not so determined as those against Ep hy; but when Lieut.-General Congreve heard that this locality was in German hands and that the 16th Divn was hard pressed and might soon be falling back, he came to the conclusion that the 21st must be withdrawn from its forward position in the Battle Zone to the rear line of that zone. Soon after 10 A.M. he issued instructions to that effect. The 64th Brigade, in reserve, was already in position in the right sector of these defences, from Saulcourt to Guyencourt, so the 62nd Brigade was directed to take over the left sector from Guyencourt (exclusive) to Heudicourt, held thinly by the 14/Northumberland Fusiliers (Pioneers). The 110th Brigade was to pass through the 64th and assemble and reorganize near Longavesnes, behind the right flank.

The field artillery began to retire about 11 A.M., but the orders did not reach the infantry battalions until between midday and 12.15 P.M. By that hour, the fog had cleared completely, and the withdrawal could only be executed with considerable difficulty, as the enemy infantry, passing through the north of Ep hy,<sup>2</sup> tried to follow up closely, assisted by low-flying aeroplanes. The withdrawal of the 110th Brigade was well covered by two companies of the

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> Five battalions of the 440th, 184th and 246th Reserve Regiments. Goes, p. 77.

1/East Yorkshire, which were in advance of the general line of the 64th Brigade. But the Germans penetrated to the rear of the garrison of Peizièrè (7/Leicestershire) and cut off some of it, also isolating two companies of the 15/Durham L.I., holding a strongpoint between Peizièrè and Chapel Hill, which had not received the retirement orders. This post held out until 3 P.M., when, ammunition running short, the survivors managed to make their way back to the British lines.<sup>1</sup>

By 1.30 P.M. the 21st Division was in position on the rear line of the Battle Zone, the 110th Brigade reaching Longavesnes, where it was to remain in reserve, about 3 P.M.

As on the 21st March, there was no serious pressure on the 9th Division, but its refused right flank, held by troops of the South African Brigade, with the 11/Royal Scots of the 27th Brigade attached, from Chapel Hill towards Heudicourt station, was included in the enemy morning bombardment and attacked about 9 A.M. The Germans were held in check for several hours, until towards midday they gained possession of Chapel Hill. Further attempts to advance were then stopped for a time by the stubborn defence of the line Heudicourt station—Revelon Farm, the attack costing “much blood”. Further to the left, no attack was made in the morning on the 9th Division.

At 2 P.M., therefore, the situation of the VII. Corps was as follows : the 16th Divn (47th Bde with 116th Brigade of the 39th Division attached) was retiring to the Green Line between Hamel (in the Cologne valley, where it was in touch with the XIX. Corps) and Tincourt Wood, already held thinly by some of the divisional engineers, cyclists, and 17th Entrenching Battalion ; from its left the 39th Division (118th and 117th Brigades) held the Saulcourt Switch between the Green Line and the Battle Zone. From Saulcourt, the 21st Division occupied the rear line of that zone to Heudicourt station, the 9th Division continuing the line to Revelon Farm, and north-eastwards, for three-quarters of a mile, along the Gouzeaucourt road to the front of the Battle Zone held in the morning.

The 16th Divn completed its retirement without serious

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 77, claims that the attackers took 150 prisoners in the capture of the Epéhy sector and that they came forward, “holding up their hands, ‘bringing chocolate and cigarettes’”, but regimental accounts, both British and German, do not bear out this story.

interference from the enemy, and the 47th Bde and 116th Brigade went into support behind the Green Line, which was then held by the divisional troops already mentioned and the 48th and 49th Bdes reorganized as battalions.

The retirement of the 16th Divn to the Green Line and the determined attacks made elsewhere by the enemy led Lieut.-General Congreve to renew his warnings to the other divisions that a withdrawal would probably be ordered, and he allotted sectors to them in the remaining back lines. By a telegram timed 4.15 P.M. he ordered a withdrawal of the whole corps to the Green Line to begin at 8 P.M., but at 6.15 P.M. he directed that this order should be held in abeyance, putting it in force again at 8.50 P.M.

Soon after 2 P.M. the enemy advance fell upon the 39th Division,<sup>1</sup> the 117th Brigade on its left being struck first. The 16/Rifle Brigade immediately south of Saulcourt was nearly surrounded by 3 P.M., and by 5 P.M., after a half-hour's heavy bombardment, was driven out of its position. Next the enemy captured in turn both Saulcourt and Guyencourt from the 21st Division.<sup>2</sup> In consequence, when darkness fell about 7.30 P.M., the whole 64th Brigade was ordered to retire south-westward past Longavesnes to the Green Line, where it was reinforced by the 13/Gloucestershire (Pioneers). The 62nd Brigade, further north, since Guyencourt on its right was lost and the enemy was then entering Heudicourt<sup>3</sup> on its left, had already received orders, at 5.30 P.M., to withdraw. So it fought a continuous and desperate rear-guard action until darkness brought relief. Half of the guns of the 21st Division had been sent back early in the afternoon, but the remainder in covering the retirement did great execution on the enemy advancing over the open, and fought to the last, with the result that nine guns were left on the field.

The 39th Division, seeing its own left front broken near Saulcourt, with its flank, if not its rear, threatened as a result of the 21st Division giving ground, had no alternative but to retire also.<sup>4</sup> Thus by night both the 39th and 21st

<sup>1</sup> It was without its artillery, which was not returned by the 16th Divn until 7.30 P.M.

<sup>2</sup> Saulcourt was captured by the inner wings of the 50th Reserve Division and 9th Reserve Division, the latter having come up from the second line; Guyencourt by the 79th Reserve Division. Over four hundred prisoners are claimed in Saulcourt.

<sup>3</sup> Heudicourt was taken by the 183rd Division.

<sup>4</sup> The movement began between 5 and 5.20 P.M. according to brigade orders, which are confirmed by battalion diaries.

Divisions, as well as the 16th, had reached the Green Line. The 110th Brigade was not long left in reserve, for the 62nd Brigade was found to be so weak that during the night the 110th had to be sent up on its left ; it did not reach its position until 4.30 A.M. on the 23rd.

The 9th Division, acting on the instructions of the VII. Corps, began its withdrawal to the rear line of the Battle Zone at 4.30 P.M., a movement which was to be continued to the Green Line at 7.30 P.M. The first stage was carried out easily by the centre and the left. On the right, however, the defenders of Heudicourt station (11/Royal Scots of the 27th Brigade and the right of the South African Brigade) and of Revelon Farm, standing only slightly in front of the line to which the first withdrawal was to be made, were in too close contact with the enemy to disengage. The railway station fell first, and then the Germans surrounded the farm, "where the hard struggle cost much "blood". Bombarded at close range by trench mortars, and bombed by aeroplanes, the company of the 11/Royal Scots in the farm held out until 6 P.M. when battalions of three different regiments stormed it. In the words of a German regimental history, the company "had covered "the retreat of the main body even at the cost of being "destroyed itself".

The guns of two batteries of the 9th Division had to be abandoned after firing until the last possible moment, as the teams had not come up ; but the rest of the divisional artillery was withdrawn to Moislains to cover the Green Line.

The second phase of the withdrawal to the Green Line proved more difficult than the first. The 21st Division having retired from the rear line of the Battle Zone about 6 P.M., the right of the 9th Division became exposed. The South African Brigade therefore formed a defensive flank facing south, and held it until 7.30 P.M., the hour fixed for the withdrawal. By that time the direct line of retreat westward was blocked by the enemy who had entered Heudicourt, and it had to move northward by Fins. A company of the 7/Seaforth (the right battalion of the 26th Brigade, north of the South Africans) formed a flank on the Fins—Gouzeaucourt road ; the headquarters of the South African Brigade manned some trenches on the high ground at Sorel le Grand (just south of Fins) ; and the 6/K.O.S.B. (27th Brigade) took position south of this village. By means of the fire of these small bodies the enemy's north-

ward advance was stopped long enough for the South African Brigade to make good its retreat to Fins, whence it withdrew unmolested to the Green Line.

The 26th Brigade, though further removed from the dangerous thrust of the Germans through Heudicourt, was threatened by two enemy divisions bearing down on it.<sup>1</sup> By a stroke of fortune, it was enabled to retire unmolested. Before it was clear of the Battle Zone the Germans had begun a methodical attack in many lines, but as they moved down the slope into Gouzeaucourt, their leading lines entered an anti-tank minefield, and exploded some of the buried charges.<sup>2</sup> A panic ensued and the advance was brought to a standstill for a considerable time, sufficient for the 26th Brigade to get clear. On reaching Fins the 7/Seaforth and 5/Cameron Highlanders found the village in possession of the enemy, but, by making a detour, to the north, they rejoined the 8/Black Watch now in the Green Line, without further incident.<sup>3</sup>

One platoon of the 7/Seaforth received no orders, and remained in the line held that morning. Realizing towards 10 P.M. that all other troops had retired, the commander marched it off across country, meeting and dealing with several parties of the enemy. The platoon reached the Green Line without a casualty, bringing in eighteen prisoners. With this exception, what remained of the VII. Corps was by nightfall established on the Green Line, to which a support line had been dug in places by the 39th Division engineers. A total of 95 field guns had been lost on the 21st and 22nd, but the 282nd Brigade R.F.A. from G.H.Q. reserve had been seized on by Major-General H. C. C. Uniacke (G.O.C., R.A., Fifth Army) and its batteries were able to come into action on the 39th Division front. Of the heavy artillery, three guns had been lost on the 22nd, making a total of 28 for the two days. The VII. Corps now had no infantry reserve, while the divisional reserves amounted to only a few battered battalions.

The right flank of the corps was now some two miles in

<sup>1</sup> 107th and 54th Reserve.

<sup>2</sup> Trench mortar bombs, with sensitive fuze.

<sup>3</sup> After the fall of Revelon Farm "in the sixth hour of the evening", the 123rd Regiment (27th Division), its colonel having got hold of a British message which said that the Cambrai Salient was to be evacuated, and knowing the ground from 1916 and 1917, pushed on across country "in the first shadows of night" to Fins, which was found to be empty. It was shortly afterwards shelled by German artillery, and only by hurrying back himself in a captured car could the colonel get the bombardment stopped.

advance of the left of the XIX.; but it was the left flank which gave cause for anxiety, since there seemed every probability of a gap occurring at that point between the Fifth and Third Armies. At 12.15 P.M. the 9th Division had informed the 47th Division, the right of the Third Army, by telephone, of its probable retirement in the evening; every effort was then made to impress upon the 47th Division the magnitude of the German offensive and to explain the policy of retirement. But the 47th Division insisted that it was the business of the 9th to form a defensive flank to keep up connection, if the latter retired. At 6.30 P.M. General Gough paid a visit to the headquarters of the Third Army at Albert, to discuss the situation and ask for help, and it was arranged that a brigade of the V. Corps should be held ready to fill any gap which might occur. The 99th Brigade of the 2nd Division, in corps reserve, together with a machine-gun company, was detailed for the purpose. These troops were then near Equancourt (a mile west of Fins), behind the Green Line at the junction of the two Armies. At 7.30 P.M., when the left of the VII. Corps was retiring to the Green Line, the 99th Brigade was ordered to occupy a trench line which covered Equancourt on the east<sup>1</sup> and rejoined the Battle Zone three thousand yards north of that village. Even there the brigade was not in touch with the 47th Division. The V. Corps was duly informed of this fact and Lieut.-General Fanshawe promised that the gap, in his area, should be filled by 5 A.M. on the 23rd.<sup>2</sup> Meantime at 9.10 P.M. he put the 99th Brigade under the orders of the VII. Corps, which handed it over to the 9th Division.

Thus by the night of the 22nd, the Fifth Army had been driven, or had retired, from its Battle Zone, and from most of the Green Line, in fact only its left corps, the VII., was still holding its sector of that line. Its two right corps, the III. and XVIII., were back on the line of the Crozat canal and the Somme. On the extreme right the passages of the canal near Tergnier were in the enemy's hands. Between the XVIII. and VII. Corps, but not in touch with

Map 4.  
Sketch  
15.

<sup>1</sup> See Sketch 4 of Flesquières Salient where the trench is marked "Dessart" and "Third System".

<sup>2</sup> The V. Corps had received orders to retire, as will be seen, not to the front of its Battle Zone as first instructed, but to the Metz Switch (see Sketch 4, Flesquières Salient), which ran east of Metz en Couture ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles N.N.E. of Fins) northwards into the Battle Zone and south-westwards towards Equancourt.

them, the 24th and 50th Divisions of the XIX. Corps held a line east of the Somme. A single French division had appeared behind the right at Chauny, and two others and a dismounted cavalry division were en route for the same sector. Of British reinforcements, only the 8th Division, beginning to arrive at Chaulnes in the XIX. Corps area, was in sight.

No operation orders were issued by the Fifth Army on the 22nd except that already given,<sup>1</sup> directing the III. Corps to stand fast, the XVIII. to retire to the Somme, and the others to make short withdrawals. This was reported to G.H.Q. at 10 P.M. without any general description of the situation; but the front line which was held had been mentioned in telegrams at 2.30 P.M. and 8.30 P.M., the latter message ending, "During the day heavy fighting " took place on the front of the III. and VII. Corps, while " XVIII. Corps repulsed with heavy loss attack on Béthen- " court ". Details, however, had been given by the telephone and reported by liaison officers.

On the whole, the Fifth Army may be said to have done remarkably well on the 22nd in delaying the enemy advance; for the Germans had reinforced their front line by divisions originally in their second line, whilst the divisions of the Fifth Army, much reduced by the fighting on the 21st, worn by fatigue and want of sleep, with smaller numbers and fewer machine guns than on the first day, had a longer line to defend. The troops remained well in hand, and the few cases of panic and hurried retirement from the partial cover of shallow trenches under heavy gun fire had been easily dealt with by the voices and example of regimental officers. Unfortunately General Gough's declaration of general strategy seems to have been regarded by one of his corps commanders as an invitation to retire, as in a normal rear-guard action, when the enemy showed deployed strength. On the 22nd March 1918 it was not a case of gaining time by forcing an enemy advancing in column to deploy: he was already deployed and the time which it was essential to gain could only be obtained by fighting, and fighting, at the longest possible range, with the fullest use of artillery. The troops fought magnificently, but, owing to habits acquired in trench warfare, at ranges which were far too short.

In a retirement of the magnitude and nature in question, the general policy should have been to hold on during day-

<sup>1</sup> See page 266.

light and slip away a couple of miles or so to a new position during the night, leaving only a screen behind. It was simply courting disaster to hold on and be found at day-break in the position occupied the night before, already registered by the enemy's artillery. The latter was thus never handicapped by the fog, which prevented the British guns from seeing the targets presented by the German infantry on the move, until the morning had considerably advanced.

It is not easy in any case to issue instructions in anticipation of a retreat forced upon an Army by the enemy ; it is particularly difficult when the immense weight of his attack cannot be forecast, when his success against different parts of a long line has varied considerably, and when against some parts a totally unexpected depth of penetration has been achieved in an unforeseen short space of time. In the circumstances a retirement more or less in line, in view of there being practically no reserves to regain a lost position by counter-attacks, was eminently desirable. The long bound of the XVIII. Corps from the front of the Battle Zone through the Green Line to the Somme, on the supposed instructions of higher authority nearly proved disastrous ; for the XIX. Corps, north of the XVIII., had made no preparation for such an extensive withdrawal, and the VII. Corps, the left of the Fifth Army, was tied to the right of the Third in the Flesquières Salient, where General Byng gave ground grudgingly. When the XVIII. Corps had gone back to the Somme line, the right, at least, of the Third Army might at once have been reinforced by G.H.Q. so as to fill the gap, or ordered to withdraw to the "Red Line", behind its Green Line. The junctions of Armies often require the attention of the high command.

All divisions and corps were very sensitive about their flanks, and, remembering perhaps the fate of the battalions in the Forward Zone on the previous day, thought it necessary to order retirements whenever an enemy movement threatened to penetrate past them. A fear of envelopment is well justified in battalions and small units, but less so in large formations, and still less in an array of corps and divisions stretching over fifty miles. For the large formations ought to have reserves available to send against the flanks of an enemy who has penetrated past a flank, and so perhaps into a pocket. To echelon to the rear the forces on the wings was a normal precaution even in peace time ; but turning back a defensive flank, so

often adopted at this period, merely widened the gap, and with troops in trenches, their heads very little above ground level, such gaps could rarely be covered by fire. The cavalry divisions, if retained mounted, would have been invaluable—indeed they were to prove so later—in order to gallop from place to place to deal, in flank, with any German troops which had broken through. They had unfortunately been sent into action dismounted as infantry, and though they did magnificent service were deprived of the opportunity of attaining more striking results by use of their mobility.

The over-hasty withdrawal of the XVIII. and the very heavy numerical superiority of the enemy opposite the III. Corps, proportionately heavier than elsewhere, made it a serious problem whether direct French help could arrive in time, especially if the habit of the British soldier to stand and fight it out—whatever the odds might be—was, as it seemed to him, to be changed into a habit of “skedaddle”. If the right wing of the Fifth Army was going back too rapidly for the French divisions to reinforce it, then a French attack from the south across the Oise against the ever-lengthening flank of Hutier’s Army might be the most effective form of help. This operation does not appear to have been considered; indeed General Pétain, as will be seen, got it into his head that the British were retiring *northwards*.

There is, fortunately for the British Empire, a Divinity which shapes its ends. The rapid retirement of the XVIII. Corps to the line of the Somme enabled General von Hutier to report that his first task of establishing flank protection along the Crozat and Somme canals had been accomplished with consummate ease. This success in contrast with the slighter progress elsewhere was, we shall see, to mislead German O.H.L. and result in a continuation of the operations in a direction in which they could have no decisive strategic effect.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

22ND MARCH 1918 (*concluded*)

#### THIRD ARMY

(Maps 1, 5 ; Sketches, 2, 3, 4, 6, 15)

THE Third Army was by no means in so critical a situation as the Fifth. In men and guns it had originally possessed nearly double the strength of the Fifth when calculated in relation to the miles of front;<sup>1</sup> only two of its four corps had been attacked; and only three of its divisions had been driven back to the rear trenches of the Battle Zone. It had used the 40th Division to replace the hard-hit 59th Division, but still had five other divisions in reserve (Guards, 2nd, 19th, 25th and 41st); another division could be obtained by reducing the garrison of three holding the Flesquières Salient. General Sir Julian Byng's anxiety was not so much for the corps which had been attacked as for the V. Corps, since the successful pressure of the Germans on the haunches of the Salient in the VII. Corps (Fifth Army) sector, and, to a still greater depth, on the IV. Corps sector, made it obvious that further advances at these places must necessitate the withdrawal of the V. Corps from the ground gained in November 1917. In the hope that after all it might not be necessary, the G.O.C. Third Army did not give any order with regard to retirement until the afternoon. To prevent the enemy from breaking in on the flanks, he relied on the V. Corps holding two large defended areas in the Battle Zone, Metz on the right and Hermies on the left. The stand which was made by the infantry, engineers, and pioneers on the 22nd justified the confidence reposed in them by their commander.

Map 5.  
Sketch 15.

<sup>1</sup> See page 116.

The V. Corps (Lieut.-General E. A. Fanshawe) front in the apex of the Salient, not having been assaulted by the enemy in his great offensive on the 21st March, had been withdrawn over two thousand yards during the night of the 21st/22nd. Nevertheless on the morning of the 22nd the position of the corps formed an even sharper salient than before. To its right, in consequence of the general retirement of the Fifth Army, the 9th Division (VII. Corps) had been ordered to conform to the movement, and had fallen back to the front of the Battle Zone. On the left of the Salient the IV. and VI. Corps had been driven back, even further, to the rear line of the Battle Zone. The purpose of the enemy to "pinch out" the gas-drenched Salient by attacks on its haunches was clearly evident.

Practically the whole of the V. and IV. Corps fronts and much of the VI. Corps front were held by the troops which had been in action on the previous day; many of the battalions of the two latter corps had been reduced to the establishment of a company or less; no one in the three corps had been able to obtain much rest during the night. General Byng had nevertheless decided that he must call on these weak and weary battalions to bear the onset of yet another enemy assault; by no other means could reserves be kept in hand for emergencies.

#### *V. Corps*

Behind the three divisions in the front line: the 47th (Major-General G. F. Gorringe), the 63rd (Major-General C. E. Lawrie), and 17th (Major-General P. R. Robertson), stood the 2nd Division (Major-General C. E. Pereira). Thus, there was a strong garrison for the Salient in comparison with the other parts of the front, and although the troops in it had suffered from gun fire and gas in the previous week and had not yet been made up to their former strength, they were neither so much below establishment nor so exhausted as those of the IV. and VI. Corps. The frontage of the Salient measured nearly fourteen thousand yards; but this could be considerably reduced by retire-

**Sketch 4.** ment to the Battle Zone (Second System), and still further by withdrawal behind Havrincourt Wood to the rear of that zone (Third System). By such retirements, too, the Salient would tend to disappear, troops would be freed to join the reserves, and there would be less danger of the formation of a gap between the Third and Fifth Armies.

But in spite of G.H.Q. warnings,<sup>1</sup> the Third Army was not yet prepared to abandon the last tract of ground won in the Battle of Cambrai.

The night of the 21st/22nd was relatively quiet except for shelling of the Flesquières Salient. From prisoners' statements, it was anticipated that the attack would be resumed at 5 A.M.; but the fog which came on again during the night no doubt caused a postponement of the hour. As on the 21st, it cleared from the high ground in the Third Army area rather earlier than it did further south, and there is no mention of any being prevalent after 10 A.M. The first serious fighting of the day was a heavy attack<sup>2</sup> beginning, after a bombardment, at 9.30 A.M., against Hermies (garrisoned by the 7/Lincolnshire of the 17th Division). Fortunately, the enemy shells fell on the village itself, whilst the defenders lay well in front of it, commanding all the ground over which the Germans must attack. The enemy advance, therefore, being exposed to a steady field-gun barrage and heavy machine-gun fire, was slow. After being enfiladed by a battery of the LXXIX. Brigade R.F.A., firing shrapnel, infantry helping to bring up ammunition, the Germans finally came to a standstill about 1 P.M., a quarter of a mile away. A renewed bombardment "was insufficient and dangerous to the German "troops", and at 5 P.M. the assault was abandoned. The German losses were "heavy",<sup>3</sup> in fact the dead lay in piles before the wire. A surprise attempt made after dark by one battalion also failed. Simultaneously with the attack on Hermies another had been made against the 1/4th Gordon Highlanders on the right of the IV. Corps; this gained a little ground, and about 1.20 P.M. broke in and increased a gap in the line,<sup>4</sup> which, however, was immediately filled by reinforcements.<sup>5</sup>

A series of other attacks was delivered, for the purpose of holding the V. Corps to the ground in the Salient: about 11 A.M. from the direction of Marcoing against the 63rd Division; between 2 and 4 P.M. minor efforts against the

<sup>1</sup> See page 115.

<sup>2</sup> The attack on Hermies, which the Germans meant to take, was made by the three infantry regiments of the 4th Division, which had been in second line on the 21st. This division was put in on the left of the 119th which was to carry on the attack in the original direction.

<sup>3</sup> These details are taken from "Regt. No. 14".

<sup>4</sup> There was a considerable gap between the defences of the V. and IV. Corps, from lack of co-ordination.

<sup>5</sup> The attack was made by part of the 24th Reserve (Saxon) Division, originally in reserve.

17th Division between Havrincourt and Hermies, repeated at 5 P.M. with flame projectors; about 6.30 P.M., with much bombing, against Havrincourt (12/Manchester); and against the 47th Division from the direction of Villers Plouich. Three attacks were made later on Havrincourt, the last continuing until 8 P.M., when the LXXVIII. Brigade R.F.A. greatly assisted the defence by putting down an effective barrage on the Germans the instant they rose to advance.<sup>1</sup> An assault made about 7 P.M. against the 1/18th London (47th Division), east of Beauchamp, was also repulsed. Thus the V. Corps maintained its position with comparative ease, the battalions in the line feeling that their shooting had inflicted losses many times greater than those they had suffered.

During the afternoon Lieut.-General Fanshawe, in order to safeguard his left, placed the 5th Brigade (2nd Division), of the corps reserve, at the disposal of the 17th Division. Later, after the 9th Division, in conformity with the rest of the Fifth Army, had been forced to make a considerable retirement, another emergency had to be met. As the reserve battalions of the 47th Division had already been used to establish a right defensive flank north and northwest of Gouzeaucourt Wood and the corps cavalry (converted into cyclists) had been brought up, Lieut.-General Fanshawe ordered another brigade, the 99th (2nd Division)—owing to gas casualties in the Flesquières Salient only little over a thousand strong—to extend the flank to the vicinity of Equancourt. This brigade, as we have seen, had been directed by Army instructions to fill the gap between the 9th and 47th Divisions, that is between the two Armies. By this means it was hoped to gain time for the V. Corps to escape; since, by the retirement of the Fifth Army, the southern flank of the Flesquières Salient had been increased by about eight thousand yards, and the three forward divisions of the V. Corps were consequently left in a most hazardous position. They were, in fact, holding two sides of a triangle, which, including the front of the 154th Brigade to the west of Hermies, measured together about twelve thousand yards, whilst its base, along the rear line of the Battle Zone, was no more than eight thousand.

<sup>1</sup> The attacks were made by the 53rd *Reserve Division*. The advance was difficult owing to machine guns hidden in the village and among trees and bushes commanding the lines of approach. At 7 P.M. a tremendous storm of fire roared down on the German skirmish lines lying in the grass, and the enemy was in fear of a counter-attack. "Res. Regt. No. 242."

As early as 1.15 P.M. the Third Army had issued an order<sup>1</sup> for the retirement of the V. Corps to the front line of the Battle Zone, that is practically to the base of the triangle, during the night of the 22nd/23rd. Even then, as the VII. Corps on the right withdrew to the Green Line and the IV. Corps on the left was forced out of the Battle Zone half-way to the Green Line, the V. Corps would still be left in a salient.

#### *IV. Corps*

The IV. Corps front from the west of Hermies to the Hirondelle valley—over twelve thousand yards—was held by eight weak brigades of the 51st, 19th, 6th and 25th Divisions.<sup>2</sup> Behind them stood four brigades<sup>3</sup> with the field companies R.E. and pioneers, whilst the 41st Division, released from G.H.Q. reserve and allotted to the IV. Corps, was moving up. Against this thin line the enemy, with every intention of breaking through, brought eight divisions<sup>4</sup>—half of which, it is true, had suffered considerable losses on the previous day. In addition his attacks, already prepared and supported by heavy artillery, were assisted by numerous low-flying aeroplanes.

The infantry attacks began about 7 A.M., but made little progress of importance for many hours. A German account states:<sup>5</sup> “The losses mount up. The German appetite for attack dwindles. Thoughts of Verdun came back “to recollection; can it be that the attack has run itself to “a standstill on the second day? Watches show that it is “past 2 P.M. Not a move relieves the horrible stagnation.” Then, unexpectedly, the British front began to waver, for ammunition was running short in some units, and the weight of numbers gradually told. The first break, according to German accounts, was at Vaulx—Vraucourt. Soon there was a six-mile gap between Beaumetz and Mory, and an entry into Bapaume that night seemed possible.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 23.

<sup>2</sup> 154th, 57th, 152nd, 153rd, 18th, 71st, 75th and 16th Brigades: the strength of some of these, notably the 16th, 18th, 71st and 153rd, did not average more than the establishment of a battalion, and that of the 152nd not much more; the 9/Norfolk mustered 70 and the 2/Sherwood Foresters, 110 of all ranks.

<sup>3</sup> 74th, 58th, 56th and 7th.

<sup>4</sup> 119th, 3rd Guard, 39th (from second line), 20th, 195th, 1st Guard Reserve (from second line), 17th, and 111th in first line.

<sup>5</sup> Goes, p. 71.

Why further success was denied to the Germans will be told in due course.

The attack on the extreme right of the corps, the 1/4th Gordon Highlanders of the 154th Brigade (51st Division), near Hermies, has already been mentioned. Although heavy pressure was applied to the whole corps front, the heaviest experienced in the early part of the day was on the left against the 6th Division ; but up to 9.30 A.M. the Germans had made no progress anywhere. Then, however, they broke the 16th Brigade front<sup>1</sup> near Vaulx Wood, and although driven out by counter-attack, they renewed the assault at the same place and penetrated to within half a mile of Vaulx village. Checked in front, and caught by fire from the defensive flanks which were formed on each side of the breach, they could gain no further ground until about 2 P.M. Rifle ammunition then began to fail the defence, and so the line west of Vaulx Wood was driven in. Simultaneously an attack from the Hirondelle valley struck the left flank, for it was the enemy's set policy to increase any breach already made. As a result, about 4.15 P.M., the brigade fell back through Vaulx—Vraucourt, where heavy fighting ensued in the streets, as men from the divisional reinforcement camp, who were hurriedly digging a line behind, "downed tools" and made a fine counter-attack by which the Germans were driven out. Nevertheless about 6.30 P.M., the enemy regained possession of both villages, but his efforts to debouch therefrom remained fruitless, so that no further anxiety was experienced in this quarter. The survivors of the 16th Brigade were re-organized on the Green Line, where limbered wagons came right into the line to deliver boxes of ammunition.

Eastwards also, although two of its battalions counted only 180 men all told, the 71st Brigade repulsed every attack until about 2 P.M., when the enemy's efforts to extend the breach made at Vaulx Wood succeeded, and forced the brigade back to the Morchies—Vaulx line. There the 3/Worcestershire (74th Brigade) being ready in position, and having the support of all four batteries of the

<sup>1</sup> The companies of the 11/Leicestershire (Pioneers) were distributed among the battalions. The battalions of the 75th Bde (25th Division) were also distributed one to each brigade of the 6th Division, 8/Border Regt. being with the 16th ; 2/South Lancashire with the 71st ; and 11/Cheeshire with the 18th.

256th Brigade R.F.A., shooting over open sights, inflicted such heavy losses on the enemy that further progress for a time was checked.<sup>1</sup>

The left flank of the 18th Brigade, which had maintained its position in spite of being hard pressed, was now uncovered, and, though a little time was gained by a counter-attack, its two left battalions, the 2/Durham L.I. and 1/West Yorkshire, now reduced to a combined strength of only fifty, were ordered back on Morchies, the 11/Essex, the third battalion, forming a defensive flank. There they held on until 6 P.M., at which hour the resistance of the 3/Worcestershire and the 71st Brigade—reduced to about one hundred and forty men—was overcome. The left of the 51st Division, next to the Essex, still managed to cling to its trenches.

The 18th and 71st Brigades rallied on the 58th Brigade, which had advanced during the morning to a two-foot deep support trench sited about a thousand yards behind Morchies. There it had already dealt with parties of the enemy which had penetrated through gaps and attacked. In this apparently desperate situation, the enemy's further advance into the breach between Morchies and Vaulx—Vraucourt was stopped by a counter-attack of 25 tanks of the 2nd Tank Battalion, one of the three tank battalions in the Third Army reserve.

In accordance with orders issued by the IV. Corps at 3 P.M., these tanks had moved up from Haplincourt (4 miles south by west of Morchies) and at 5 P.M. were advancing northwards from Beugny (2 miles S.S.W. of Morchies). One battery of the 256th Brigade R.F.A. covered their movement with smoke shell, helped out by grass fires which the Germans had lighted in the hope of dislodging the defenders. Scared at the sight of the tanks, the leading German infantry retired in disorder, as a spectator said, "demoralized", carrying with them the larger bodies concentrated in rear. The four batteries of the 256th Brigade R.F.A., again did great execution among them, and were able to catch the German artillery struggling to

<sup>1</sup> Large bodies of the enemy being seen around Morchies at a distance of little more than 2,000 yards' range, to the left of the zone of the 256th Brigade R.F.A., all four batteries were run out of their pits, and for four hours, over open sights, visibility being perfect, the gunners fired, plainly seeing the results of their fire. The brigade being in action close to the divisional dump, there was plenty of ammunition, and it expended over 20,600 rounds (field guns 18,100 and the howitzer battery, 2,500); B/256th fired 1,750 rounds per gun.

come into action in close support of the infantry.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the tanks remained out too long, slowly cruising around firing at the Germans. They were unaccompanied by infantry to make good the ground gained, except one tank on the right, which two companies of the 11/Cheshire followed,<sup>2</sup> and they soon became the targets of guns in position a couple of miles away on the higher ground near Lagnicourt, with the result that only nine of the 25, with about thirty per cent of the personnel, came out of action.<sup>3</sup>

The well-timed attack of the 2nd Tank Battalion had stopped the victorious Germans, and, as their accounts say, "the tanks had done their duty".<sup>4</sup> The enemy made no further advance against the front held by the 58th Brigade and the 18th and 71st Bdes. This rested secure in British possession, although a wide gap existed between its left and the 7th Brigade on the Green Line.

The enemy<sup>5</sup> made no progress against the 51st Division until after 5 P.M., although during the struggle near and west of Morchies, heavy fighting had also continued to the east of that village. Fortunately, the German bombardment fell short, driving two hundred Germans, dug in in front of the British line, into the hands of the 153rd Brigade as

<sup>1</sup> One German battery made a gallant effort to come into action, but a gun battery and the howitzer battery were turned on to it. Two of its guns were never even unlimbered, detachments and teams being annihilated. The other two managed to drop their trails, but never fired a round until dusk, when the 256th Brigade was on its way back to the new line.

<sup>2</sup> This tank was apparently alone on the right flank east of Morchies; for the Cheshire saw no other. It was eventually knocked out by a direct hit, and the two companies then retired.

<sup>3</sup> The intention was that the tanks, advancing northwards on each side of Beugny and followed by any infantry available, should clear the way and enable the infantry to re-occupy the ground cleared, and fill a gap by connecting the left of the 58th Brigade with the 7th Brigade in the Green Line. A company of the 9/Welch (58th Brigade) was at that time attempting to fill this gap and was actually engaged when the tanks arrived. The remaining companies of the 9/Welch were garrisoning Beugny, and the senior tank and infantry officers on the spot agreed, in view of the exigencies of the situation and of the distinct order that, in the event of a breakthrough from the north, Beugny was to be held at all costs, that the garrison could not be further weakened.

The tank officer thereupon decided that the situation on the 58th Brigade's left front might be improved if he proceeded boldly to meet the enemy attack then in progress, even without the support of infantry.

<sup>4</sup> Goes, pp. 73-5, speaks of "tanks as far as the eye could reach from Morchies to Vraucourt", and accounts for twenty tanks in actual figures, besides "several" more, "numerous others" and "a row of the trampling beasts", but there were only 25 in all.

<sup>5</sup> 24th Reserve Division.

prisoners.<sup>1</sup> The enemy artillery then lengthened, and after the 11/Essex (6th Division) facing Morchies had been driven back about 6 P.M., a number of enemy low-flying aeroplanes came into action. The 1/7th Gordon and 1/6th Black Watch of the 153rd Brigade, north of the Bapaume—Cambrai road, with a company of the 9/Loyal North Lancashire (74th Brigade) which had come up from the reserve line (the so-called Beaumetz—Morchies Switch) to help them, were then forced back southwards to the road. But the rest of the Loyals, the 11/Cheshire and the 9/Norfolk in the Beaumetz—Morchies Switch barred the way to further progress westwards and caused the enemy heavy losses.

After a short stand on the road, these battalions, with the 1/7th Black Watch next to them on the right, were driven across it, and formed a defensive flank between the road and Beaumetz. This line they were able to hold—the reserve gun positions previously dug proving very useful to the infantry as ready-made strongpoints—until the close of the day. The 1/6th Seaforth Highlanders (152nd Brigade), which already had a defensive flank on its left, managed to maintain touch with them. The 57th and 154th Brigades, further to the right, were also able to hold their positions, in spite of bombardment and inroads of the enemy with bomb and bayonet, although, about 6.30 P.M. two companies of the 1/4th Gordon Highlanders, to which it was impossible to supply ammunition, were overwhelmed. Touch with the 17th Division (V. Corps) on the right was then broken.

Thus on the northern flank of the Flesquières Salient, despite terrific bombardment from heavy guns, the enemy had failed to make any substantial progress, and his infantry attacks, not so heavy perhaps as they were further west, had been held. But north of the Cambrai road, by sheer weight of numbers, the Germans had made a further advance averaging one and a half miles, at heavy cost to the defenders,<sup>2</sup> though at still heavier cost to themselves. No corps reserves had been expended, except the tank brigade, and fresh troops were available to oppose the further progress of the enemy in that sector.

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 72, speaks of the shells of the German super-heavy howitzers falling on the 3rd Guard Division near Morchies, about 3 P.M., as they were assembled ready to assault. "The effect was devastating"; the survivors streamed back, vowing vengeance on the artillery and were only with difficulty restrained.

<sup>2</sup> Thus, the 1/7th Gordon Highlanders mustered 8 officers and 100 other ranks, and was reorganized as a company.

*VI. Corps*

At the close of the fighting on the 21st, the right and centre divisions of the VI. Corps, 59th (Major-General C. F. Romer) and 34th (Major-General C. L. Nicholson), were much reduced in strength, and the former—less the 177th Bde, the machine guns and artillery (15 guns)—had been sent into reserve<sup>1</sup> and its place taken by the 40th Division (Major-General J. Ponsonby). The left division, the 3rd (Major-General C. J. Deverell), had been less severely tried, and still held its original position, except the 9th Brigade, which had been forced slightly back. Nearly all the Battle Zone between the southern boundary of the corps and Croisilles having been lost, the new position of the front line formed a large re-entrant angle, with the village of St. Leger near its apex. From the rear line of the Battle Zone at the corps boundary on the Hirondelle, it ran just in front of that line to St. Leger, then behind Croisilles to the front line of the Zone, whence opposite Fontaine lez Croisilles it crossed over to the Forward Zone.

The German stroke, which fell on the right of the corps, prolonged the attack directed against the IV. Corps as far as a point a little north of Croisilles; it was executed by parts of six divisions.<sup>2</sup> The general course of the battle was much the same as further south, except that one of the German divisions, detailed to act as right flank guard of the great front of attack, broke in during the morning and captured Henin Hill. Otherwise, in spite of desperate efforts, the Germans made no progress, and “the whole front stood immovably still”. Then, about 3 P.M., the break-in near Vaulx—Vraucourt upset the equilibrium, and the weight of numbers compelled the VI. Corps to fall back.

On the previous evening when the 120th and 121st Brigades<sup>3</sup> of the 40th Division approached the rear portion of the Battle Zone they found that the Germans had effected some small lodgments in it. Most of them were driven out. As daylight came, however, other parties

<sup>1</sup> Early in the day, about three hundred men, all that were available of the 176th and 178th Bdes, were also sent up to the 177th.

<sup>2</sup> Part of the 111th, and the 221st and 234th of the original first line, and the 2nd Guard Reserve and 6th Bavarian from the second line. The 239th was in support.

<sup>3</sup> The 119th Brigade was on the left, in support of the 34th Divn, and the 177th Bde in support of the 40th Division.

were found established actually between the two brigades. On the right these were soon expelled, but on the left it was not until 11.45 A.M., after the aid of an 18-pdr. barrage had been invoked, that they could be ejected,<sup>1</sup> 14 of their machine guns being captured. Larger bodies of Germans thereupon began a systematic attack, both against the right of the division (14/Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and 10th/11th Highland L.I.) and against the junction of the two brigades ; but by 1 P.M., after severe fighting, they had been driven off and the line restored. Shortly afterwards the Germans began to make progress against the IV. Corps towards Vaulx and up the Hirondelle valley. In view of this threat, the 40th Division began forming a defensive flank, nearly two thousand yards long, facing nearly due east along the Beugnatre—Écoust road, from the Battle Zone to the Green Line. The 10th/11th Highland L.I., the second battalion from the right, was made the pivot of the change, and the right battalion, the 14/Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, was to wheel back on to the new line ; but, having heard that the IV. Corps was going to counter-attack, its commander decided to postpone the move for a time.

It was now about 3 P.M. The enemy could be seen massing in front of the 121st Brigade and of the adjoining 103rd Brigade (34th Divn). The fire of the 178th and 181st Brigades R.F.A., in the valley near Ervillers, with excellent forward observation, and of every available machine and Lewis gun was directed on the enemy concentrations. These offered quite exceptional targets and great execution was done, the rate of gun fire rising to four rounds per gun per minute. In the course of time about a dozen enemy aeroplanes came over to locate the guns which were inflicting such heavy losses, and counter-battery fire was opened soon afterwards by the German artillery. Although the latter did some damage, the most advanced British battery fired throughout the day without a casualty. Meanwhile the Germans made a most determined thrust up the Hirondelle valley, always trying to push forward machine guns in advance of the infantry, but these were knocked out one after the other by the divisional artillery.

By 5.30 P.M. the weight of numbers of the attackers and

<sup>1</sup> Lieut. E. F. Beal, 13/Green Howards, was awarded a posthumous V.C. for his services during this fighting, in which Lieut.-Colonel T. Eardley-Wilmot, commanding the 12/Suffolk, was killed.

the exhaustion of the defenders began to exert their effect. A heavy barrage put down by the enemy half an hour later on the rear line of the Battle Zone seems to have been the determining factor ; in any case the 121st Brigade, and, as we shall see, the 103rd on its left, began to drift back in small parties to the Green Line in front of Mory. The retirement was none too soon ; for, as it was, the greater part of the left battalion, the 12/Suffolk, was cut off and overwhelmed.

In the 120th Brigade, the 14/Argyll, on the right, had held its old position till 4.30 P.M., when, in the absence of any counter-attack by the IV. Corps and as the Germans were pouring round Vraucourt, the battalion fell back gradually to the defensive flank. This line, too, was soon attacked in front and enfiladed from the left, so that at 7 P.M. the brigade was withdrawn to the Green Line, whither the 177th Bde—after, for a time, holding the support line, now the front line—had preceded it. There touch was gained with the 6th Divn on the right and the 121st Brigade on the left.

The troubles of the 177th Bde, with its three very weak battalions—the 2/5th Lincolnshire mustered only eighty other ranks—were not yet over. It was holding the Green Line east of Mory, and against this village the nine infantry battalions of the German *2nd Guard Reserve Division*, fresh from the second line, were now directed. About 8 P.M., the 2/4th Leicestershire, attacked on its left flank and from the rear, fell back on Mory, the 2/5th Lincolnshire and 4/Lincolnshire also evacuating the Green Line and moving round the village to the high ground which lay about six hundred yards south of it and commanded the valley. A brigade order issued at this moment directed that the Green Line should be recaptured by an advance through Mory, but it is doubtful whether the message ever reached the battalions. In any case the German Guard without being interrupted in its attack, gained possession of Mory l'Abbaye at the north-east corner of Mory, where it maintained its hold. Attempts—in which the remnants of the 12/Suffolk and two companies of the 20/Middlesex (121st Brigade) took part on the left—were at once made to dislodge the enemy, but without result. On the other hand, until 4 A.M. on the 23rd the 2/4th Leicestershire, with a company of the 4/Lincolnshire, clung tenaciously to the southern half of Mory, repelling all assaults. Then the Germans turned a trench mortar and a high velocity gun against it,

whilst they encouraged their attack by cheering and blowing bugles; but all their attempts were foiled. Between 4 and 5 A.M. the violence of the attack died down, and the survivors of the sorely tried 177th Bde slipped away.<sup>1</sup>

The front of the 34th Divn included St. Leger, but excluded Croisilles, which lies in the Sensée valley and had been evacuated on the previous night in favour of the ridge to the west of it. The higher part of this ridge, on the north, is known as Henin Hill. The three brigades, 103rd, 102nd and 101st, all very weak,<sup>2</sup> had the 119th (40th Division) in support behind the right.

Croisilles marked the right of the great German front of attack, the enemy divisions to the north of it having no more to do than to guard the flank as the attack progressed. About 8 A.M., under cover of the fog, Bavarians<sup>3</sup> stormed Croisilles, thinking it was still occupied; pressing on, in spite of machine-gun fire, they next penetrated the right centre of the 102nd Bde. Here they were at once counter-attacked and driven out, so that by 10 A.M. the line was completely restored. About the same time an attempt had been made<sup>4</sup> against the wood on the eastern side of St. Leger, held by the 9/Northumberland Fusiliers (103rd Bde), but it was stopped by "overwhelming fire" after being allowed to reach the wire; enfilade fire from the wood, according to German accounts, then forced the attackers to take cover again in their trenches.

Further north, however, between 9 and 10 A.M., the enemy<sup>5</sup> drove back part of the 15/R. Scots, the right of the 101st Bde, to the third line of trenches, and, having thus made a gap, proceeded to attack the line from the rear with trench mortars, grenades and rifle fire. Shells of the divisional artillery barrage which had been called for, fell on British and German alike, and in the end the retirement

<sup>1</sup> The Germans claim more prisoners at Mory, 365, than there were defenders, and the account concludes: "it was already 8 A.M. when the 'three regiments [of the 2nd Guard Reserve Division] threw themselves 'on Mory and took the village and the ground on either side of it'. Goes, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> The 102nd, for instance, including J Special Company R.E. and a company of the 18/Northumberland Fus. (Pioneers), mustered about five hundred men, and was formed into one composite battalion.

<sup>3</sup> 6th Bavarian Regiment of the 6th Bavarian Division brought up from second line.

<sup>4</sup> By the 10th Bavarian Regiment.

<sup>5</sup> 234th Division which, as flank guard, was to push on north-west, regardless of the division on its left.

of the Royal Scots was continued a thousand yards back to Hill Switch, a partially dug trench, of which the northern half ran along the summit of Henin Hill. A new position was taken up in this trench alongside the 16/R. Scots, the reserve battalion of the brigade. Here the two battalions were located by enemy aircraft, and about midday an accurate bombardment of high-explosive shell fell on them, against which the shallow trenches afforded no shelter. Being attacked simultaneously by enemy infantry, the remnants of the two battalions, with detachments from four or five others, having lost most of their officers, retired pell-mell under cover of a barrage fired by the divisional artillery. They rallied in the rear portion of the Battle Zone near Boiry Becquerelle, about two thousand five hundred yards behind their last position.

The front of the 34th Divn had thus been badly ruptured. Northward of the gap, the 11/Suffolk, the left of the 101st Bde on Henin Hill, reinforced by about one hundred men of the 22/Northumberland Fusiliers (102nd Bde), and a machine-gun company (which lost 59 men out of 96) of the 40th Division, had managed to hold its own. It continued to cling to its ground even after the right flank was exposed by the retirement of the Royal Scots, although the enemy assaulted with great pertinacity, and brought up field guns and low-flying aeroplanes to aid his infantry—two of the planes being shot down by Lewis-gun fire. Between 5 and 6 P.M., the hill was heavily bombarded, yet it was not until well after dark that the Suffolk and its supporters left their position, half of them retiring north-westwards and half northwards to the 3rd Division. On the way the former party manned a bank to bring effective fire on the Germans who attempted to advance westwards.

Meanwhile, to the south of the gap, the rest of the 34th Divn had been more than holding its own. The retirement of the 15/R. Scots forced the 102nd Bde, which had the 207th and 209th Field Companies R.E. and 18/Northumberland Fusiliers (Pioneers), as well as the remains of its own three battalions in the line opposite Croisilles, first to swing back its left to form a defensive flank, and then, about 11 A.M., under protection of this flank, to withdraw all its units to the southern half of Hill Switch. There it came into touch with the 103rd Bde on the right and the 16/R. Scots (the reserve of the 101st Bde) on the left. After the retirement of the latter unit, about 1 P.M., the 102nd Bde again formed

a defensive flank—along the reverse slope of the spur west of Croisilles, thereby causing the front of the brigade to assume the form of an acute angle. The 103rd Bde had disposed the 9/Northumberland Fusiliers in St. Leger Wood, the 10/Lincolnshire north of it and the 13/Green Howards (40th Division) south, in the fire trench of the rear defences of the Battle Zone. When the news of the German success against the 101st Bde reached Br.-General J. G. Chaplin, he ordered three companies of the 1/East Lancashire, brought into reserve during the night, to support the 10/Lincolnshire, and this reinforcement reached the left of the latter battalion about 2.30 P.M.

Since midday a general increase in the enemy shelling in the 34th Divn area had been felt, and this proved to be the prelude to an infantry attack by the *6th Bavarian Division* against St. Leger Wood about 2.30 P.M. The fighting which ensued was very fierce, but finally the Bavarians, being more than six to one, gained a footing in the front trenches on the eastern edge of the wood. They then made desperate efforts to exploit their advantage. Their valour was spent in vain against the magnificent defence of the 13/Green Howards, 9/Northumberland Fusiliers and 1/East Lancashire, which had just come up, together with the unceasing support of one particular field battery. The German artillery shelled both sides indiscriminately, and the Bavarians, being more numerous, suffered thereby more seriously than the British. On the left, unfortunately, the 1/East Lancashire was badly enfiladed when the enemy reached the gap left by the retirement of the Royal Scots; the battalion was compelled to throw back its left flank further and further. On the right, too, the 121st Brigade was in difficulties, so that flank also was threatened. When, therefore, about 4 P.M. the Bavarians made another strong attack on St. Leger and southwards of the village, they gradually got possession of the fire trench. Towards 5 P.M., it looked as if the line could not be maintained much longer, and Major-General Nicholson judged that it was time to support it. Having kept the 119th Brigade (40th Division) in reserve all day in and behind the Sensée Switch,<sup>1</sup> he now ordered forward two companies from the support battalion, the 13/East Surrey, at the north end of the switch, with two tanks, to restore the situation.

<sup>1</sup> Running north and south, west of St. Leger, connecting the rear of the Battle Zone with the Green Line. The trench was originally only a few inches deep, but the 18/Welch had spent the morning deepening it.

Before this reinforcement appeared on the scene, however, parties of Bavarians had pushed through the line : they were at once counter-attacked and driven back by the 18/Welch, which was holding the Sensée Switch. Soon afterwards, Br.-General Chaplin, in view of the danger on both flanks, considered it prudent to order a withdrawal to the rear system of the Battle Zone. By 7 P.M. this movement was carried out successfully by three of the four battalions. Touch was gained with the 102nd Bde on the left, and stragglers were reorganized behind the railway embankment in rear. The order to retire did not reach either the 9/Northumberland Fusiliers or a company of the East Lancashire which were defending St. Leger village, so when telephonic communication was restored at 8.15 P.M., Lieut.-Colonel W. A. Vignoles was instructed to bring his battalion back. He waited until between 9 and 10 P.M., when the enemy had settled down for the night, before he moved ; a Lewis-gun party which covered the retirement did not come away until nearly midnight.

Only a few unimportant attacks were made during the day on the 8th and 76th Brigades, the centre and the left of the 3rd Division ; but the 9th Brigade (Br.-General H. C. Potter), on the right, was involved in the attack of the German flank-guard division which drove in the 101st Bde. In the course of the morning, when only the 11/Suffolk of the 101st Bde was left in position, a defensive flank in a main communication trench facing south, organized for the purpose by the 9th Brigade, was manned by the 13/King's, the brigade reserve ; then, as the Germans could be seen assembling for attack, the pioneer battalion (20/K.R.R.C.) was sent to reinforce the King's.

After considerable shelling, the Germans, from 4.30 P.M. onwards, made repeated assaults against the defensive flank, to which some of the 11/Suffolk had retired, and also against the right front. These were repulsed by rifle fire and counter-attack, so that at 8.15 P.M. the line was still intact. Shortly after, however, the right of the defensive flank near Henin Hill was driven in, and the defenders retired about five hundred yards to another line of trenches. Otherwise, the line of the 3rd Division was maintained.

Although the 18-pdrs. of the division did some effective shelling during the 22nd, the field artillery observers had the mortification of seeing masses of Germans to the southward during the greater part of the day, mainly out of range ;

as communication could not be gained with the longer range heavy batteries, which had gone back, these targets escaped.

As a general result of the fighting, then, the VI. Corps had swung back, pivoting on its left : the 40th Division was on the Green Line and had lost Mory ; the 34th Divn was in the rear system of the Battle Zone ; and the 3rd Division was still in the Forward Zone. Connection between the divisions was secured by switches previously prepared for the purpose. The situation was still good, and the corps was well supplied with reinforcements. The 2nd Guards Brigade, with a machine-gun company, had been moved from the XVII. to the VI. Corps area on the evening of the 21st, and placed under the orders of Lieut.-General Haldane at 12.30 P.M. on the 22nd ; it now stood behind the left of the corps, near Mercatel (north-west of Henin). At 7 P.M. the remainder of the Guards Division, near Berneville (4 miles south-west of Arras), was handed over by the XVII. to the VI. Corps, the 1st Guards Brigade moving forward by bus to Arras ; lastly the 31st Division was also sent to Lieut.-General Haldane and moved up towards the battlefield.<sup>1</sup>

### *XVII. Corps*

The XVII. Corps, on the left, was left in peace until midday, and even after that hour no infantry attack was directed against it. There was increased artillery activity on battery positions, forward roads and back areas, whilst Arras itself, long undisturbed, was also shelled. The heavy fighting on the VI. Corps front, however, made it seem improbable that the left of that corps would be able to maintain its position, and during the afternoon Lieut.-General Sir Charles Fergusson (XVII. Corps) gave verbal instructions to Br.-General W. H. L. Allgood, who was in temporary command of the 15th Division on the right, to be prepared to form a defensive flank facing south along the boundary of the two corps. Br.-General Allgood expressed his doubts

<sup>1</sup> In February, when 3-battalion brigades were organized, a battalion each was taken from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Guards Brigades, to form the 4th Guards Brigade, which was allotted to the 31st Division, now consisting of the 92nd, 98rd and 4th Guards Brigades.

The division embussed at 9 A.M. for the Basseux area (7 miles west of Henin). After the 92nd Brigade had arrived there, the 98rd Brigade and the 4th Guards Brigade were ordered to go on to Boiry St. Martin (5 miles west of St. Leger), and at 6.30 P.M. the divisional artillery, which had made a long march, was ordered to reinforce the 34th Divn.

whether the 15th Division, unless reinforced, could hold this long addition to its front ; for all three of its brigades were already in the line. There was, moreover, no divisional reserve except a weak cyclist battalion, and the only other troops out of the line were the reserve battalions of the three brigades ; further, the defences along the boundary were no more than a communication trench, not sited to resist a strong attack, and completely overlooked from Henin Hill. Lieut.-General Fergusson had no troops with which to assist the 15th Division, but he was anxious that it should remain in its position and retain Monchy le Preux, which had such unequalled facilities for observation. So far as he could see, no advantage would be gained by a withdrawal except that the enemy would have to find out the new position taken up, organize a fresh attack, and move forward his field guns over ground traversed in every direction by old and new trenches. At 8 P.M., therefore, he issued an order by telephone for the defensive flank to be manned ; but before the order could take effect it was superseded by instructions from the Third Army.

General Byng, as already mentioned, had issued orders at 1.15 P.M., in view of the enemy progress against his own IV. and VI. Corps and against the Fifth Army, for the V. Corps to withdraw during the course of the coming night from the apex of the Flesquieres Salient to the front of the Battle Zone near its base. But very soon it became evident to him that the Germans were continuing to press their advance, and he began to feel uneasiness as to the ability of the IV. and VI. Corps to maintain their positions in the face of the heavy assaults being made on them. About 3.30 P.M., soon after the enemy success at Vaulx—Vraucourt had upset the equilibrium so far maintained, Lieut.-General Lawrence, the Chief of the General Staff, came to Albert from G.H.Q. to visit the Third Army on behalf of the Commander-in-Chief. In their interview General Byng made it clear that if the enemy continued his attacks in strength, pushing back the general line south of Arras, it might become necessary to withdraw the right of the XVII. Corps in order not to lose touch. This meant evacuating Monchy le Preux and abandoning its advantages of observation ;<sup>1</sup> moreover the enemy would then be pre-

<sup>1</sup> Not only over the German lines in the vicinity, but as far east as Cambrai ; no enemy gun for miles around could be fired without its position being spotted from the village by two artillery observation posts using giant periscopes.

sented with a perfect position from which to pursue further operations against Arras, which, as we know now, was to be the next German move. On the other hand, its retention, as already pointed out by Br.-General Allgood, necessitated forming a weak defensive flank. Lieut.-General Lawrence therefore decided to return at once to report to the Commander-in-Chief.

Later, at 6.30 P.M., General Gough arrived at Third Army headquarters to discuss the situation and ask for the despatch of a brigade to the boundary of the Third and Fifth Armies, which resulted, as we have seen, in the 99th Brigade being deployed near Equancourt. As a further result of this visit, General Byng instructed the V. Corps at 6.53 P.M. to make a withdrawal deeper than to the front of the Battle Zone, as had been ordered at 1.15 P.M. The right and right centre were now to retire to the Metz Switch and Metz—Equancourt Switch, whilst the left, in Sketch 4. the front of the Battle Zone, still kept connection with the defenders of Hermies.

Two hours after the despatch of these instructions for the withdrawal of the right of the Third Army, General Byng was compelled to intervene on its left. Lieut.-General Haldane, in reporting the situation of the VI. Corps, whose right and centre had been forced back, said it was now imperative that the 3rd Division on the left, although its front was secure, should be withdrawn to the rear of the Battle Zone, if it were still considered necessary to maintain a continuous front. Just after 8.30 P.M., therefore, the commander of the Third Army decided that the XVII. Corps should likewise swing back its right, and sent a telephone message to Lieut.-General Fergusson to inform him of the impending move of the 3rd Division, next to him. He instructed him to conform to it, and authorized him to evacuate Monchy le Preux, if he considered it necessary. Lieut.-General Fergusson, still reluctant to abandon this important locality, telephoned to the VI. Corps to enquire whether, if the XVII. Corps threw back its right flank somewhat, Lieut.-General Haldane could bring forward his left to connect with it. Unfortunately the VI. Corps was not in a position to accept this plan; its front was already extended to the utmost, the 2nd Guards Brigade, from the reserve, having already been put into the line. The XVII. Corps, on the other hand, could not find the troops to man the long connecting link required (nearly five thousand yards), as by now the whole of its reserve

division (the Guards) had been transferred to the VI. Corps. Lieut.-General Fergusson made one more effort, however, to avoid the evacuation of Monchy, and telephoned to General Byng, who could only tell him that there were practically no more available reserves, and warn him that on no account must the 15th Division, which was holding Monchy, be cut off. At 9.30 P.M., therefore, the G.O.C. XVII. Corps unwillingly confirmed the warning order for the withdrawal which had been sent out.

At 11.45 P.M., two hours after this decision had been taken and reported to General Byng, definite information reached the Third Army of the occupation of Fins by the Germans. This advance resembled the thrust of a gigantic finger into the British line at the point of junction of the Fifth and Third Armies, and was, as is now known, the result of the enterprise of a single enemy regiment. Without this knowledge, it seemed a most alarming threat to the security of the garrison of the Flesquières Salient, although the danger would to some degree be met by the retirement of the right of the V. Corps to the Equancourt Switch, which had already been ordered. Further decision by Third Army headquarters was rendered unnecessary by the arrival, soon after midnight, of the operation orders issued at G.H.Q. at 11.30 P.M.<sup>1</sup> These definitely directed the Third Army to "keep in touch with the left of the Fifth Army and be prepared in case of necessity to conform and withdraw to the general line Tortille river<sup>2</sup>—Croisilles". As a matter of fact, except on the right, nearest the Fifth Army—that is the V. Corps and the right of the IV.—the troops of the Third Army were already on the line indicated, and near Croisilles, even west of it.

At 12.45 A.M. on the 23rd, therefore, for the third time in twelve hours, the Third Army issued orders for the withdrawal of the V. Corps. It was now to retire to the Green Line as soon as possible, and the IV. Corps was to fall back with it. As this would shorten the front of the latter corps, Lieut.-General Harper was to take over about three thousand five hundred yards of the VI. Corps front in order to afford relief to Lieut.-General Haldane, the new boundary

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 24.

<sup>2</sup> The Tortille and the unfinished portion of the Canal du Nord (the excavation for which followed the general line of the stream) runs southward from the vicinity of Equancourt and enters the Somme a little west of Péronne.

between the IV. and VI. Corps being Ablainzeville—Ervillers, that is north, instead of south, of Mory.

At 2 A.M., the Third Army instructed the corps commanders to begin work on the line, known as the Villers au Flos or "Red" Line, already surveyed, which was to have formed the rear line of the Rear Zone, three to five thousand yards behind the Green Line. All field companies R.E., tunnelling companies, pioneer battalions and labour units in the Army which could be spared were to be set to work on it. Two switches were planned to connect the Red and Map 1. Green Lines : the first, in the VI. Corps area, from near Hamelincourt (west of St. Leger) south-westwards to near Courcelles, and the second from the boundary of the VI. and XVII. Corps, to run north-east and south-west, about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles south of Arras ; both switches were intended to hinder any enemy force from advancing on that town from the south-east.

The rearward moves of the V. Corps to the Metz and Equancourt switches, as ordered at 6.53 P.M., the guns beginning to go back at 9 P.M., were carried out without interference from the enemy. He was in fact so quiescent that the possibility of a return to the original position of the 21st was contemplated, and consequently the engineers were not permitted to do as much damage as they might have done before leaving. The V. Corps received the 12.45 A.M. order for the further retirement at 1.30 A.M., and at once warned its divisions ; but, as orders for its execution were not sent out by the corps until 7.20 A.M. on the 23rd, the movement will be described amongst the events of that day.

The 3rd Division (VI Corps) was in actual contact with the enemy, who was round its right flank, so Major-General Deverell expected considerable difficulty in getting away men and guns, although he had secretly made all possible preliminary preparations—including selecting rear artillery positions and dumps—the object of which he had made known only to his Staff and brigadiers. Patrols, however, now found the Germans exhausted, lying in confusion in scattered groups, evidently not inclined for further activity. Thus even the trench mortars and forward anti-tank guns were withdrawn without difficulty ; for the enemy did not stir until next morning, when, after the rear parties had left, he advanced very cautiously against the old line.

The retirement of the 15th Division (XVII Corps) from Monchy was particularly distasteful to the men, as many of them had fought in the division when it advanced in this

vicinity in 1917. In spite of short notice, the operation was successfully carried out without opposition or interference from the enemy, and the division was in its new position by 3 A.M., with the rear guards of all three brigades still occupying the old line undisturbed. It had of course been impossible to remove all stores, but such as could not be carried away were either destroyed or thrown into shell holes full of water.

During the night the 41st Division relieved the 6th Divn, which, on the conclusion of the operations at 4 A.M., went back to the Red Line. Its 18th Bde is recorded as having mustered 10 officers and 110 men all told, and half of these were the personnel of brigade headquarters, runners, signallers and attached men. The 41st Division should also have relieved the 7th Brigade of the 25th Division, but, owing to delays in finding it, was unable to do so. The 31st Division (4th Guards and 93rd Brigades) carried out a partial relief of the 34th Divn and 119th Brigade (including the 18/Welch in the Sensée Switch), completing the operation during the following night (23rd/24th). The Guards Division moved up towards the left of the VI. Corps.

The stout defence put up by the IV. and VI. Corps, and the heavy losses inflicted by them on the enemy, were destined to contribute to a German change of plan. The advance of the *Seventeenth Army* against the Third Army had nowhere made very much headway, and was very disappointing to Ludendorff and Crown Prince Rupprecht.<sup>1</sup> It had, however, involved the abandonment of Monchy le Preux on the left, and, in combination with the German thrust against the VII. Corps of the Fifth Army, had occasioned the beginning of the evacuation of the Flesquières Salient on the right. Possibly the former retirement was unnecessary : Monchy was a magnet to the Germans and it might have cost them dear to attain it by force. But no object could be served, on the contrary only danger incurred, by clinging to the Salient.

The much smaller success of the enemy against the two corps of the Third Army which were attacked, compared with that against the four corps of the Fifth Army, was due, no doubt, to the fog clearing earlier in the former sector, to the defences being better elaborated<sup>2</sup>—a series of well constructed continuous lines with plenty of switches, instead of hastily dug shallow trenches—and to these defences

<sup>1</sup> See Note at end of Chapter XIV.    <sup>2</sup> Compare Sketches 2 and 3.

being more strongly manned. The results of the day afford some indication—for there was no difference in the troops themselves, except in numbers—of what might have happened had there been time and labour to complete the defences taken over by the Fifth Army from the French.

The 22nd was a day of great air activity ; in particular low-flying operations, gallantly carried out with the single object of relieving the pressure on the infantry, met with a considerable measure of success. On the Fifth Army front, three British squadrons made low-flying attacks with 25-lb. bombs and with machine guns, whilst four others also dropped bombs to a total of 730 on enemy reserves, as well as on railway junctions. On the Third Army front, only one squadron was used for low-flying attacks, three trips being made. The enemy airmen endeavoured to prevent reconnaissance, also to some extent to assist their own infantry by low-flying attacks, during which three of their aeroplanes were shot down by fire from the ground.

There was a good deal of desultory air fighting in the afternoon and evening ; in all, 31 German planes were claimed as destroyed and 23 driven down out of control, at a cost of four aeroplanes missing, 15 wrecked and 11 temporarily unserviceable, burnt or abandoned when the squadrons moved back. Much information was gained of the enemy's advance and of the intense activity behind his front. During the night of the 22nd/23rd, a total of 805 25-lb. bombs and six 40-lb. phosphorus bombs were dropped behind the enemy front, and two dumps set on fire ; but, for part of the night, operations had to be stopped owing to bombing attacks on aerodromes by German aircraft.

#### NOTE

##### THE GERMANS ON THE 22ND MARCH<sup>1</sup>

After hearing the official report of the successes of the 21st March, the Kaiser bestowed on Field-Marshal von Hindenburg the Iron Cross with Golden Rays, the last recipient of that honour having been Field-Marshal Prince Blücher in 1814.

The instructions issued by the *Eighteenth Army* directed the attack to be continued with all vigour : the southern wing to "take"—that is, reach and cross—the Crozat canal, and the northern to capture the "British Third System", "Happencourt — Beauvois — Caulaincourt", that is the Green Line. The Supreme Command was anxious that the *Eighteenth Army* on reaching this line should give

<sup>1</sup> Same authorities as for 21st.

assistance to the *Second*; but the German Crown Prince argued that this could best be done by pressing forward. The results of the day against the Fifth Army exceeded expectation; but towards evening the arrival of French troops via Chauny and Noyon was reported.

Crown Prince Rupprecht repeated his order to the *Second* and *Seventeenth Armies*, that the first objective was the capture of the Flesquières Salient by advance on either side of it. The *Second Army* issued instructions that the attack should be continued in the original direction, that is to the line, Tertry (on the Omignon)—Ytres (7 miles south-east of Bapaume). Its corps made good progress, very nearly reaching the objective laid down for them, "in spite of "bitter resistance by the British . . . which only lessened when the "XIII. and XXIII. Reserve Corps, in co-operation, took the hotly "contested Epéhy. Similarly, Le Verguier fell by the combined "efforts of the XIV. and LI. Corps". At 4.45 P.M. orders were issued for the pursuit of the retiring foe to the Tortille, but the British position on the stream [there was none] was not to be attacked until after artillery preparation. Crown Prince Rupprecht began to fear that the British might escape from the Flesquières Salient, and ordered the *Second Army* to direct its right on Manancourt (3 miles south of Ytres), and similarly the *Seventeenth Army* to keep its left more to the west, in order not to alarm the garrison of the Salient too soon. The importance of the success in capturing Henin Hill, as a right flank protection to the advance of the *Seventeenth Army*, was at once recognised.

The *Seventeenth Army* also received the order to continue the attack, with the main pressure on the left wing, so as to ensure connection with the *Second*. It was to endeavour to form a defensive flank towards the Flesquières Salient by attacking Havrincourt—Hermies. No progress was made—as indicated in the text—until after 4 P.M., when the 75th Regiment (17th Division) captured Vaulx—Vraucourt. It is claimed that by evening the Army had taken 191 officers, 5,350 men and 48 guns. But "the German losses, particularly in officers, were serious in many divisions, and parts of "the divisions of the third line had to be employed". At 4.45 P.M., when Crown Prince Rupprecht directed the *Seventeenth Army* not to wheel too soon towards the Flesquières Salient, the direction of the left of the attacking corps was changed towards Bapaume. A later

**Sketch 6.** order instructed the *Seventeenth Army* to make preparations for the "Mars" attack on either side of the Scarpe. Crown Prince Rupprecht, it appears from his diary, thought it possible that the British might stand on the Green Line—as they hoped to do—in which case the artillery would have to be brought up and deployed, and it might be better to abandon the "Michael" offensive as a whole, and be content with "pinching" out the Flesquières Salient.

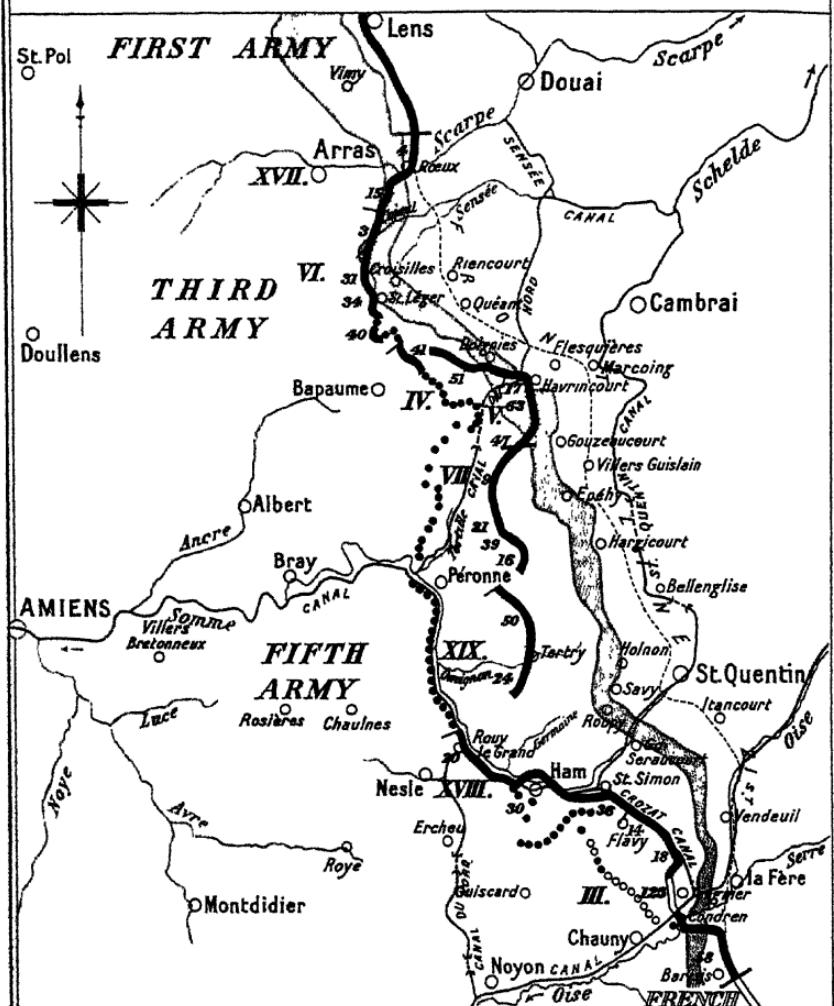
Ludendorff was definitely disappointed. He records: "Crown Prince Rupprecht's Group could not gain ground between Croisilles "and Péronne to the extent which had originally been intended. . . . "On the 22nd March there was little change in the front of the "Seventeenth Army. . . . The result was that the enemy in the "Cambrai [Flesquières] re-entrant was not cut off, nor could the "opposition to the *Second Army* be indirectly reduced [by the "efforts of the *Seventeenth*]. The *Second* had been obliged to rely "on its own unaided efforts".<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ludendorff, i. pp. 598-9.



Sketch 16.

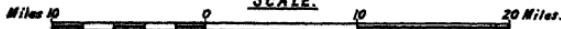
## 23RD MARCH.



### REFERENCE.

Line 23rd March.....	British, French.....	24th March a.m.....	British, French.....
Army boundaries.....	.....	Corps boundaries.....	.....
Battle zone.....	.....	.....	.....

### SCALE.



Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch).

Ordnance Survey 1954.

## CHAPTER XIII

THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

23RD MARCH 1918

FIFTH ARMY

(Maps 6, 7 ; Sketch 16)

At dawn on the 23rd March, the day on which for the first time shells from one of the German long-range guns fell in and near Paris,<sup>1</sup> the front of the Fifth Army covered a length of no less than forty miles. The III. Corps, whose share of the front amounted to nine miles, though driven from the Crozat canal on the right, still held Condren, whence the line ran northwards for four miles to strike the canal opposite Liez. Behind this sector the leading French reinforcements of the 125th Division, had begun to appear. From Liez the left of the corps held the canal bank for five miles to a point near Camas Farm. The XVIII. Corps continued the line along the Crozat and Somme canals, with a bridgehead at Ham, to Béthencourt; it thus occupied a frontage of fourteen miles. North of this, in the XIX. Corps sector, 8th Division troops were beginning to arrive from reserve to occupy the west bank of the Somme canal up to Eterpigny, eight miles further north, from which place to La Chapellette (1½ miles) the 66th Divn was already in position. The part of the canal line in the XIX. Corps area was, for the moment, only a reserve line; for the 24th Divn and 50th Division, with the 1st Cavalry Division

<sup>1</sup> The calibre was 8·26-inch; range about 75 miles. Seven guns were made, one of which was worn out on the practice range. Three scattered emplacements were prepared in a wood, known locally as La Sapinière in the Forest of St. Gobain, to the south-west of Crépy station, between Laon and La Fère. The breech of the second gun blew off as it was firing its third round on 25th March. The third gun opened fire on 29th March. Between 23rd March and 8th August about 367 rounds were fired at Paris.

in support, were about five miles east of it, with their right, in the air, at Guizancourt and their left on the Cologne at Brusle. The VII. Corps was echeloned two miles forward of Brusle and held the Green Line, with its right at Hamel and its left at Equancourt, a frontage of  $7\frac{1}{2}$  miles. Its sector was extended, temporarily, for another mile by the attachment of the 99th Brigade (2nd Division) from the V. Corps (Third Army), with the object of ensuring touch between the Fifth and the Third Armies.

General Gough had intended that the Green Line, which ran northward in continuation of the Crozat canal from its junction with the Somme, should be the front line of his whole Army; but, as the XVIII. Corps had fallen back and the XIX. Corps had partially conformed to its retirement, only the III. Corps and the VII. Corps, on the right and left of the Army, were still on the Green Line.

The very wide extension of the Fifth Army, the forward position of the III. Corps, and the slow arrival of the French reinforcements were causes of grave anxiety to General Gough; while the open right flanks of the XIX. and VII. Corps were to prove elements of weakness, and lead to repeated retirements as the best means of securing their safety.

Fog again formed during the night, and lay thicker and lasted longer on the right than elsewhere; at dawn it was barely possible to see across the canal. As the sun rose it cleared off slowly, but earlier than on the two previous days. In contrast to a very cold night, the day which followed seemed warm.

### *III. Corps*

Much reduced by the heavy losses of the past two days, the III. Corps had only one brigade, the 54th of the 18th Divn, which had been in corps reserve on the 21st, still fairly strong and moderately fresh. To fill the gaps in the ranks of the others, dismounted units improvised from the cavalry, entrenching battalions, a divisional signal school, part of a motor machine-gun battery, isolated companies of engineers and pioneers, and corps reinforcements and divisional details hastily formed into scratch companies, were interpolated among the infantry. The artillery had found new positions and there was no lack of gun ammunition.

As already related the troops of the 58th Divn, north

of the Oise, were now under the command of the G.O.C. of the French 125th Division, General Diébold. He had been instructed by the French Sixth Army to counter-attack on the morning of the 23rd with the object of regaining the western bank of the Crozat canal, near Tergnier, whence the III. Corps had been driven. Accordingly, after a bombardment lasting, from 6 to 7 A.M., carried out by four brigades of French artillery and two brigades of the 18th Divn—the troops of which were to co-operate with and protect the French left—four battalions of the French 125th Division in two portions,<sup>1</sup> covered by machine-gun fire, advanced in the thinning fog through the British line. Two battalions were directed against Tergnier, and two, which were accompanied by two companies of the 7/Queen's, against the high ground at Le Sart, west of Quessey.

On the right, the Germans were caught by surprise so that Tergnier was nearly reached; but they soon recovered themselves and opened heavy fire. On the left a terrific machine-gun barrage at once came down on the attackers, and the French commanding officer was one of the first to be hit.<sup>2</sup> After several attempts to advance, the two battalions fell back to their starting place, thereby masking the fire from the British trenches. Great difficulty was thus experienced in stopping the Germans who tried to follow up their success.

Further north, in the meantime, the enemy had attacked the 55th Bde, the right wing of the 18th Divn, which was extended from a point a little south of Le Sart to the canal opposite Liez, and thence along the canal to Mennessis. On this front great mixture of units occurred, as the relief of the 4th Hussars, the 12th Entrenching Battalion and divisional details by the 7/Queen's and 8/East Surrey had not quite been completed owing to the fog, and most of the men of the former units were still in or near the front line. Moreover, to add to the confusion, two companies of the 7/Buffs had arrived early in the morning to fill a gap between the Queen's and the East Surrey. Enemy shelling,

<sup>1</sup> Of the other five battalions, one was south of the Oise and three companies of another were employed at railheads. The remainder were in reserve, two being ordered to dig in.

<sup>2</sup> Lieut.-Colonel C. Bushell, commanding the 7/Queen's, displayed magnificent leadership and gallantry, taking charge of the French left as well as of his own two companies, and leading them forward under heavy machine-gun fire. Though severely wounded in the head, he remained at duty till carried off unconscious. He was awarded the V.C., but was subsequently killed in action near Morlancourt in the great attack of the 8th August.

which had continued intermittently throughout the night, increased in intensity as dawn approached; and about 7 A.M., behind a machine-gun barrage, the Germans, crossing in small parties in boats and on rafts got ready by their engineers under cover of the fog,<sup>1</sup> attacked between Liez and Mennessis. The divisional details, after losing their two senior officers, were driven from their trenches, the main force of the Germans penetrating through and enlarging the gap thus made. In spite of desperate resistance, the enemy then turned south-westwards, pushed through the Bois Hallot, and drove the left of the 55th Bde westward to trenches occupied by the 7th Cavalry Brigade on the eastern edge of the Bois de Frières. About 10 A.M. this attack broke in on the left flank of the 7/Queen's and the French, who had to face north to meet it. By this time, too, the enemy had taken advantage of the exposed position of the two French battalions which had advanced on Tergnier: their ammunition began to run short, so that about 11.30 A.M., they were forced to retire through the British line.<sup>2</sup> Another French battalion on their left, sent up from the reserve to fill the space between the two attacks of the 125th Division, was then overwhelmed by Germans who issued from Tergnier. Though held back for a time by artillery fire, the enemy followed up this success and turned the British defences lying to the south, forcing the 173rd Bde, which was on the right of the 55th, to fall back, and capturing a battery whose teams had been shot down by machine-gun fire. By 2 P.M. the last of the Allied troops in this sector, including the 7/Queen's, now almost surrounded, had retired from their morning position. Mixed together, French, cavalry, infantry, engineers, pioneers and improvised units, they occupied a new line, parallel to the old one, and nearly two miles west of it, on the Noureuil—Frières Faillouel<sup>3</sup> road, which runs chiefly on a series of low crests through the middle of the Bois de Frières. Later, at the desire of the French, a further retirement of about six-hundred yards back from the crest line was made.

The French attack had been planned in a great hurry, without preliminary reconnaissance, and carried out in a mist over unknown ground from some distance behind the

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 105.

<sup>2</sup> The French had very little S.A.A., except what was carried on the men, the railway transport allotted for the reserve ammunition having been used to bring up officers' chargers.

<sup>3</sup> Shown as Frières on the maps, except on Map 1.

British line, after due notice to the enemy had been given by an hour's bombardment. Under any conditions it stood little chance of success, and had none against the overwhelming numbers of two German divisions.<sup>1</sup> It was no more than a gallant gesture.

On the left half of the III. Corps front, the 54th Bde (18th Divn) occupied the canal bank between Mennessis and Jussy. Further to the left, the 14th Divn, much reduced in numbers by the fighting on the 21st, held only a short length of canal from Jussy (inclusive) to a point about two thousand five hundred yards north-west of that place, west of Camas Farm—the 43rd Bde, with the 5th Lancers, on the right, and the 41st, with some divisional details, on the left.

There had been, as already mentioned, in and around Jussy 16 foot bridges; these and the railway bridges north-west of the village had been "demolished" in the military sense; but the railway bridge to the south-east had been rendered unfit for railway traffic only. Simultaneously with the attack against Liez—Mennessis, under cover of fog which limited the field of view to about five yards, the Germans with three divisions made attempts to cross the canal at several places.<sup>2</sup> Continuing a struggle which had lasted most of the night, two battalions of the *1st Bavarian Regiment*, used "the ruins of the bridges" and "a bridge hanging in the water", to force a passage east of Jussy, near the junction of the 18th and 14th Divns, and carried the village with a rush. Checked for a time at the western end by close-range fire of six Lewis guns they came on again, and captured the guns after a stiff fight. By 8.30 A.M. Jussy was clear of British troops, in spite of a spirited counter-attack by thirty men of the Scots Greys, a platoon of the 11/Royal Fusiliers and a party of corps reinforcements, some of whom it is said did not know how

<sup>1</sup> 13th Landwehr and 47th Reserve.

<sup>2</sup> 34th, 1st Bavarian and 10th Divisions. Opposite Clastres, on the left wing of the 14th Divn, "Gren. Regt. No. 5" states that its battalions crossed unopposed during the night. Goes, p. 104, also states that both the 5th and 6th Grenadier Regiments "crossed the canal early in the morning, the near bank having been abandoned by the enemy, the high ground of Flavy le Martel seeming to him to be better for defence". British accounts say that the Germans who crossed during the night were driven back. This is confirmed by "Regt. No. 128", p. 358, which says, "it was intended to begin to cross at 3 A.M., but this was delayed by the resistance of the enemy". The crossing was made "on swaying improvised bridges".

to use their rifles. Enfilading the front line and then spreading left and right from Jussy, the Germans—the 34th Division having crossed south of the Bavarians—then drove the left of the 18th Divn (11/Royal Fusiliers) and the right of the 14th (9/Scottish Rifles and 5th Lancers<sup>1</sup>) back to the embankment of the railway which passes south of the village. On this line, with the help of the remnants of the 7/K.R.R.C. and of the 5th Dismounted Brigade, a stand was made for a time, though when the fog lifted about 11.30 A.M. a continuous stream of Germans could be seen pouring round the left flank.

The enemy also crossed the canal at several places on the thinly held front of the 41st Bde north-west of Jussy, and when penetration was effected drove the defenders away from the canal bank by the skilful use of machine guns. Thus by 10.30 A.M. the front line of the 14th Divn had been cleared from the canal and was on the railway embankment, which was to prove no better a defence than the canal line. In the last of the fog, which lingered over the low ground, the Germans crept up to the railway. Twice were they driven off by the enfilade fire of the cavalry Hotchkiss guns: at times the adversaries actually faced each other with nothing but the embankment between them, when bombing contests took place until both sides had exhausted their supplies of hand-grenades. Aided by an observation balloon and low-flying aircraft, the enemy finally shelled the small scattered units of the 41st Bde on the left and so drove them from the railway back to Flavy le Martel. There they rallied on a reserve composed of all available men of the 42nd Bde and some four hundred divisional details sent up to hold the Flavy le Martel—Cugny road as a defensive flank.

The success of the Germans against a single small sector of the line had its inevitable result; by 11.30 A.M. they were enfilading the left of the line along the rear of the embankment, and gradually sweeping it up. Towards midday the 14th Divn ordered a retirement to the Faillouel—Flavy le Martel road; but, the fog having cleared and the country being open, heavy casualties were suffered from machine-gun fire in this operation. The new position too could be maintained only for a time: the 41st Bde and the stragglers who had rallied to it, facing both east and north on the left, were attacked on both sides; a company in the

<sup>1</sup> The lieutenant-colonel of the 5th Lancers, H. A. Cape, was wounded, and the regiment was brought out of action by a lieutenant.

centre at the angle of the front was overwhelmed ; and although for a time the rest held on <sup>1</sup> they were eventually driven back to the slopes of the hill behind Flavy into a narrower salient.

The 43rd Bde and the 5th Dismounted Brigade held on to the road a little longer ; and then their retirement was continued a short distance back to the line of small hills lying to the south, to one of which the 41st had already been driven. There they found the 4th Dismounted Brigade already in position, having been released during the night from the 18th Divn and transferred to the 14th.

Meanwhile, to the south, although the left flank of the 54th Bde (the left brigade of the 18th Divn, which had the dismounted party of the 16th Lancers with it), had been driven back to the support line, the brigade was still able to hold on for some time to the canal bank. But by 11 A.M. the enemy was reported advancing in strength on its right flank at Mennessis. As the troops on either side had now disappeared, it was obviously impossible to hold on any longer, and Br.-General Sadleir-Jackson issued orders for a retirement, which the Royal Canadian Dragoons, dismounted, arrived just in time to cover. By noon the last troops of the brigade had left the canal ; and by about 1.30 P.M., only the left battalion, the 11/R. Fusiliers, having suffered serious loss, they were able to take position behind Frières Faillouel, in the gap between the 55th Bde and the 4th Dismounted Brigade (43rd Bde group). They were not in touch with the former. Here the remainder of the Canadian Dismounted Cavalry Brigade (Lieut.-Colonel D. J. MacDonald) joined the 54th Bde.

To sum up the situation on the III. Corps front at 2 P.M. : the enemy was everywhere across the Crozat canal, and had driven back the British troops for an average distance of two miles. From the Oise the line ran northward in front of Viry Noureuil and Noureuil, through the middle of the Bois de Frières, to the south of Flavy, where it bent back and ran westward to the north of Cugny, which was held by troops of the 86th Division (XVIII. Corps).

During the morning the situation on the northern flank

<sup>1</sup> "Gren. Regt. No. 5" says Flavy, which was completely surrounded, was taken about 2 P.M. It was held by a force of men of various units under the adjutant of the 8/Rifle Brigade, Captain Hon. C. R. Gorell-Barnes, who was killed there.

of his corps had caused Lieut.-General Butler to take certain measures of precaution. Between 9 and 10 A.M. information was received at his headquarters at Buchoire (6 miles W.N.W. of Chauny) that the Germans had forced the passage of the Somme on the XVIII. Corps front at Ham, and were advancing southwards,<sup>1</sup> thereby gravely threatening the communications of the III. Corps. Lieut-General Butler therefore sent orders to the commanders of the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions to form such combined mounted force as they could from their scattered commands to watch the northern flank. Some seven hundred men were thus collected, and to reinforce them six hundred infantry, made up of corps reinforcements and men returned from leave, were sent, under Lieut-Colonel A. C. L. Theobald, O Battery, R.H.A., with eight Lewis guns of No. 3 Balloon Company. The whole force was placed under Major-General A. E. W. Harman, commanding the 3rd Cavalry Division, and thus came to be called "Harman's Detachment". By 4.30 P.M. it was concentrated at Berlancourt (5 miles south of Ham and the same distance south-west of Cugny), where it came under the orders of the 14th Divn.

Further French assistance began to make its appearance in the course of the afternoon, the 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division, moving on Frières Faillouel and the 9th Division on La Neuville. One regiment of the latter was directed towards Harman's Detachment at Berlancourt. As soon as General Gamelin, the commander of the division,<sup>2</sup> reached III. Corps headquarters, at 10.45 A.M., in advance of his troops, Lieut.-General Butler explained to him the danger threatening from Ham and the measures which he had taken to cope with the situation; he suggested that a second French regiment might be sent to Berlancourt, whilst the rest continued to relieve the 14th Divn.

The approach of the French divisions had been made known to the troops of the III. Corps for the purpose of encouraging them; but, as will be seen, on one part of the line it had not quite that effect.

The Germans had quickly followed up the retreating brigades of the III. Corps and the French 125th Division; but much of the ground over which their advance lay was

<sup>1</sup> See p. 389.

<sup>2</sup> In 1932 he became Chief of the Staff of the French Army. The 9th Division had been resting since the 27th January.

difficult ; though there were few trees of any size in the woods which covered the centre, there was fairly thick undergrowth, and view was restricted to fifty yards or less, whilst on the flanks the ground was very open. There thus seemed some prospect of a prolonged British stand, but during the afternoon a further retirement took place, which, starting from the west, will be described briefly from left to right.

Soon after 2 P.M. the 41st Bde and 14th Divn details, under Br.-General Skinner, whose front formed an angle having its apex south of Flavy, were attacked both from the north and the east and forced to withdraw. Raked by machine-gun fire as they struggled back over the open some of the men were driven westwards towards the 36th Division (XVIII. Corps), whilst the main body continued on south-westwards. The latter had to turn and fight a rear-guard action until it reached and passed through the advanced guard screen of the French 9th Division, which had been brought up by lorry and was beginning to deploy under cover of scouts between Riez de Cugny and Cugny.

About the same time as the attack was made on the 41st Bde news reached Br.-General Tempest (43rd Bde) south-east of Flavy that no troops could be found on his left, and, almost simultaneously, that his right had broken. He therefore ordered his units to fall back on the western edge of the Bois de Genlis about Neuville, some two thousand yards in rear of the former line. On his way thither he met the leading scouts of the French 9th Division, who informed him of the advance of that division, troops of the latter eventually passing through his own.

The 5th and 4th Dismounted Brigades, next on the right of the 43rd Bde, did not receive the order nor see the battalions of the 43rd Bde disappear ; but it soon dawned on them that no troops remained on their left flank, whilst a glimpse of Germans advancing in the Somme valley below on the road from Flavy to Cugny, showed clearly that the front beyond the 43rd Bde had also given way. About 3 P.M., therefore, the commanders of the two dismounted detachments decided to fall back, and a withdrawal was made through the Bois de Genlis, and onwards through the line of the French 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division, which was formed behind the wood.

The retirement of the two dismounted brigades exposed the 54th Bde and the Canadian Dismounted Brigade, next to them, to enfilade machine-gun fire from the west

when they were already suffering from enfilade shell fire from the east. Judging the situation to be dangerous, Br.-General Sadleir-Jackson, about 4 P.M., ordered a retirement. The Canadians first withdrew from their advanced position and passed through the 54th Bde on the northern edge of the Bois de Frières, just as enemy field guns, which had come up with an infantry escort in lorries, entered Faillouel, less than a mile away, and opened fire. The 54th Bde then followed, and the two brigades retired through the French screen near Villequier Aumont, which was already being shelled.

Next again on the right, the 55th and 53rd Bdes and the 7th Dismounted Brigade, after retirement about 2 P.M. to the Noureuil—Frières Faillouel road, made a prolonged stand, killing many Germans, as the graves subsequently proved. Indeed a very violent struggle took place, in which at first a counter-attack of the details of the 10/Essex, led by the commanding officer, Major A. S. Tween, who was killed, and later French armoured cars played an important part. It was not until about 5 P.M. when their flank was turned, that the troops on the left were gradually pressed back. The right of the line held on till about 6 P.M. To relieve the situation, the 9th Cuirassiers of the French 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division, who had just come up, attempted to make a counter-attack through the south part of the Bois de Frières. As they received no artillery support and were met by murderous machine-gun fire, they were soon brought to a standstill; then being driven back they carried the British with them into the French 125th Division line which was being dug between Viry Noureuil and Villequier Aumont, beyond the valley of the little Helot stream at the back of the woods.

Further south other German attacks made little progress; but the 6th Dismounted Brigade was forced to abandon Noureuil about 5 P.M. and retire to its western outskirts. This line was maintained until after 6 P.M., when orders were received to withdraw through the French. The 178rd Bde then withdrew into support east and north-east of Chauny, with the 18th Entrenching Battalion on its right, astride the Oise canal, and the 503rd Field Company R.E. and other detachments on its left; the 6th Dismounted Brigade remained in position behind Noureuil until 1 A.M. on the 24th, when it withdrew to the left of the 178rd Bde.

It is astonishing that a force containing such a variety of units, and unused to co-operate, should have held up the enemy so long; the truth is that his artillery gave him little assistance.

Before nightfall French troops had taken over the whole front of the III. Corps, with the exception of Condren, south of the Oise canal, which was still held by a garrison of 58th Divn troops. North of the Oise, on the right, the French 125th Division held from Viry Noureuil to Villequier Aumont (exclusive); in the centre from the last-named place to La Neuville (exclusive) stood the French 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division; and on the left, which had been bent back to face Cugny—that village having been taken by the enemy about 10 P.M. from the 36th Division (XVIII. Corps)—were the French 9th Division and British 14th Divn, mixed together.

The 18th Divn was concentrated in reserve positions, about three miles north-west of Chauny; the 55th Bde at Béthancourt; the 54th at Caillouel; while the 53rd reached Commenchon at dawn on the 24th. Three dismounted brigades were concentrated in front of the 18th Divn, the 3rd near Villequier, the 7th at Ugny and the Canadian in the Bois de Caumont, near the 53rd Bde.

On their left, the 4th and 5th Dismounted Brigades were in support of the French at La Neuville. The 14th Divn obtained no relief: reinforced by the 14th Entrenching Battalion, it was left in the line, mixed with the French troops, so as to ensure that there were no gaps. To guard the left flank, the 14th Divn R.E. and one company of the 11/King's (Pioneers) were dug in near Beaulieu, with "Theobald's infantry" behind them south-west of Ville-selvile, between them and the rest of Harman's Detachment.

The whole of the artillery had conformed to the retirement of the infantry, but only six field guns had been lost. At night, the field artillery was on the general line Caumont (3 miles north-west of Chauny) and Ugny, with the left flank refused, and by dawn on the 24th, the heavy artillery, about two thousand yards behind it, was deployed on a line passing west of Chauny.

### XVIII. Corps

The line which was held by the XVIII. Corps along the left bank of the Somme had a frontage of nearly twelve miles; but on the right bank there projected a bridgehead

covering Ham. To this line the divisions of the corps had retired during the night of the 22nd/23rd March, the last men of the 20th Division, after it had carried out its duties as rear guard, crossing the river just before 5 A.M. It was now held by the 36th, 30th and 20th Divisions (the last without the 61st Brigade), with the 61st Divn, so badly mauled in the first two days of the battle, in reserve behind the 20th. The front of the corps was covered by 213 field guns, of which 85 were with the 20th Division, and 51 heavy guns.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout that portion of the Somme valley near which fighting was now to occur, the canal lying west of the river forms the main waterway. It is 58 feet wide at water level, and six feet, six inches deep. The valley is from half to three-quarters of a mile wide, with gently sloping sides ; its marshes and water meadows lie about a hundred feet below the general level of the surrounding country. The river itself is a small stream, 24 to 30 feet wide, sometimes split up into several channels ; in March 1918 it was wadable in some places, as the water was low. On its eastern bank there were dotted patches of small poplars, willows and undergrowth. The obstacle which the marshes presented to movement was increased by a number of small ponds or chains of water-logged holes, from which peat had been cut for fuel. Practically, the valley was only passable at the causeways,<sup>2</sup> which cross the waterways by a series of small bridges. There are indeed a few footways which afford a precarious passage across the marshes, and two of these paths were discovered and used by the Germans when they forced a passage north of Béthencourt and at Eterpigny. The banks of the canal are not very high above water level, but afford some cover to troops defending either bank ; the field of fire however, was limited by the patches of wood and undergrowth which have been mentioned; on the other hand the soft nature of the ground prevented enemy shell fire from having its full effect.

<sup>1</sup> One heavy brigade at Esmery Hallon, one at Ramecourt (4 miles south-east of Nesle), and two on the left at Rouy le Petit, north-east of Nesle, with five 6-inch guns further back south-west of Nesle.

<sup>2</sup> These causeways are very ancient. In 1415 the French sought to obstruct the passage of the Somme by Henry V. at Voyennes by digging holes in them, and he was delayed for some hours whilst the holes were filled up with any material to hand. See "History of The Battle of "Agincourt", by Sir Harris Nicholas, in which the translation of a Latin "war diary", kept by a priest attached to the King's headquarters, is given.

The most important event which took place on the 23rd in the XVIII. Corps area was the forcing of the passage of the Somme at Ham, by the German *231st Division* (from second line) after a dawn attack on the bridgehead, held by the 89th Brigade, 30th Division. This success enabled another German division to cross higher up at Pithon, and so resulted in a wedge being driven between the 36th and 30th Divisions—a dangerous threat against the left flank of the III. Corps. As the right flank of the 36th Division was also exposed in its turn by the retirement of the III. Corps, the Ulstermen ended the day facing in three different directions. The operations of the 30th and 36th Divisions will be described first, the comparatively uneventful day of the 20th Division being left to the last.

The 89th Brigade (Br.-General Hon. F. C. Stanley) had relieved the three field companies R.E. of the division and the three Special (Gas) Companies in the Ham bridgehead about 2 A.M. During the afternoon of the 22nd the engineers had improved and extended the old trenches which they found covering the town in a rough semi-circle, half a mile from its edge, and had erected wire ; but four or five hours' work was insufficient to make strong defences. In places, too, woods obscured the view without concealing the defences, and the line, over two miles in length, was too long to be manned by three weak battalions. On the flanks therefore the firing line did not extend back to the canal ; neither was it supported along the river bank by trenches to enfilade attacks coming from east or west, or by any retrenchment.

The German attack was made in the fog at 6 A.M., and the British accounts are not clear as to what happened ; but they lay stress on the fact that the defenders were fired into from behind, without knowing where the enemy had broken in. From the German accounts, it would seem that the direct attack from the north delivered at dawn by an infantry regiment, three batteries, engineers and trench mortar details, was held up for about an hour ; then a battalion entered the town on the west flank near the river, where there were no defenders.

Fired into from the rear by machine guns, and attacked in front, the three battalions of the 89th Brigade withdrew fighting as best they could through the town, many of the men being cut off near the river ; but a remnant managed to cross the river by the western of the two bridges, the charges in which were then fired just as the enemy was

gaining a footing on it.<sup>1</sup> Thus the bridgehead was lost and the attackers had pressed on over what remained of the bridges across the canal and river before any information of the attack reached Major-General W. de L. Williams of the 30th Division.<sup>2</sup>

After retiring across the Somme, the survivors of the 89th Bde re-formed in front of Verlaines ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles southwest of Ham) about 8.30 A.M. For a time there was quiet to the south of Ham, as the Germans did not push on beyond the railway station south of the town. In the course of the morning, therefore, the 89th Bde moved forward slightly from Verlaines towards the railway. The result of the Germans gaining a bridgehead at Ham was first to be felt to the east and above the town, where the canal bank, on the right of the 30th Division, in the 36th Division's sector, was held by the 21st Entrenching Battalion. About 6.30 A.M. this unit heard from a despatch rider that Germans were in Ham, so a defensive flank was thrown round Vert Galant, facing west. No attack from this direction developed until about 10 A.M. ; but by 10.30 A.M., when the fog was thinning, the Germans from Ham reached Vert Galant, turned it and drove the 21st Entrenching Battalion back on the railway line to the south. Here, with the assistance of a company of the 9/R. Inniskilling Fusiliers, a stand was made, although the enemy brought up field guns and trench mortars.

By this time another German division (*5th Guard*) was making its presence felt. The railway bridge over the Somme canal at Pithon, carrying the branch line from Vert Galant, had not been destroyed by the French railway authorities as arranged, but every attempt made by the *5th Guard Division* to cross it in the early morning had been effectively stopped by fire. When, however, the flank attack of the *231st Division* from Ham had driven the 21st Entrenching Battalion from the canal bank, the way over the bridge lay open ; two enemy battalions crossed about 11.30 A.M., and the combined attacks drove the defenders southward on Aubigny, where the remainder of the 9/R. Inniskilling Fusiliers stood in support. Some Germans even pushed on through Aubigny towards Brouchy, until

<sup>1</sup> See f.n. 1, page 280. The eastern bridge had already been damaged.

<sup>2</sup> The German accounts state that complete possession of Ham was not gained until 10 A.M. ; British accounts would make it 8 A.M. It would thus seem that the men of the 17th, 18th and 19/King's cut off in the town must have gone on fighting for nearly two hours.

a counter-attack, instantly initiated and led mounted by Captain G. J. Bruce, the brigade major of the 109th Brigade, drove the Germans back and retook Aubigny. But both banks of the Somme from Pithon to Ham, and the bridges, remained in the enemy's hands.

Measures had meanwhile been taken to bar any further German advance. At 7 A.M. the 90th Brigade was placed in position behind Verlaines, the 30th Division Engineers, now at Esmery Hallon, being in echelon behind its left flank. The 21st Brigade, marching from Muille, (to the south-east of Verlaines) to Ercheu (6 miles south-west of Ham and west of the Canal du Nord) to join the corps reserve, was ordered on arrival at Esmery Hallon, to wait there and co-operate with the other brigades. From Esmery Hallon eastward a rear line to Bonneuil Farm and Golancourt was dug by the 36th Division Engineers and details of the 109th Brigade.

On learning that the Germans had actually secured a bridgehead, so that the situation had become dangerous, Lieut.-General Maxse ordered the 20th Division to counter-attack. But, owing to the fog, little could be done to embarrass the enemy by gun-fire; although airmen reported that the roads leading into Ham and the town itself were crowded with vehicles not a single shell fell on the roads, and only a few dropped near the railway station.

Major-General Douglas Smith detailed the 60th Brigade, which held the right and nearest sector of the 20th Division, to organize the counter-attack. As the brigade was on a wide front with no troops to spare, the 182nd Bde of the 61st Divn, in reserve on the railway four miles west of Ham, was ordered by the XVIII Corps to find the men. In the end, by 11 A.M., it was not found possible to collect more than a composite company, a hundred strong, unfed and weary, composed of five different units of the 182nd and 184th Bdes, and two companies of the 1/5th D.C.L.I. (Pioneers), which were placed under Lieut.-Colonel L. L. Bilton (2/8th Worcestershire).<sup>1</sup> As an advance of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles had to be made, it was 2.30 P.M. before the counter-attack debouched from Verlaines northwards against the bridge-head. Assisted by four low-flying aeroplanes, but without artillery or machine-gun support, the advance was quickly brought to a standstill by enemy machine-gun fire, and Lieut.-Colonel Bilton's companies settled down on a line facing north-eastwards and eastwards. No further opera-

<sup>1</sup> In temporary command of the 182nd Bde.

tions took place in this sector, although, towards evening, as the enemy made progress further eastward, the 90th Brigade—kept in reserve behind Verlaines, which might have been used for counter-attack—was ordered to form a defensive flank on the east of the village, facing almost south-east.

On the immediate right of the 21st Entrenching Battalion, the 108th Brigade (36th Division) was not attacked by infantry in front from across the Somme. The *5th Guard Division*, after it had secured the passage at Pithon, at first gave no trouble, its advanced troops having pushed on, as we have seen, to Aubigny, whence they were driven back.<sup>1</sup>

Owing to the enemy having wrested possession of the passages of the canal at Jussy from the 14th Divn, the 61st Brigade (20th Division), temporarily under the orders of the 36th Division and situated between the 108th Brigade and the III. Corps, soon found itself in an unpleasant position. By midday or soon afterwards, the enemy was in Flavy le Martel, more than a mile in rear of its right. Nevertheless, Br.-General Cochrane, after forming a flank towards Jussy, held his ground until 3 p.m., when he received orders to retire. By this time the enemy was in Annois, actually behind the 7/Somerset L.I., which held the right of the line on the canal; all but the headquarters and one company of this battalion were cut off. The 7/D.C.L.I. on the left managed to reach the railway south of Ollezy, where, with the companies of the 12/King's on its left and the survivors of the Somerset L.I. on its right, it took position.

Still further to the right, the 107th Bde (Br.-General Withycombe), the mere fragment of a formation which at first had been in reserve, had formed with the aid of the 13th Entrenching Battalion, a line east of Cugny, as the 14th Divn (III. Corps) retired. Earlier troops of this division had been holding on in front, but by about 3 p.m. they had passed through the 107th Bde line<sup>2</sup> and, though some French dragoons (of the divisional cavalry of the 9th Division) soon came up on its right, the brigade was out of touch with the III. Corps.

<sup>1</sup> It appears that the *5th Guard Division* having penetrated between Verlaines and Sommette—Eaucourt, became alarmed and contented itself with holding the railway line south of the river, its first objective.

<sup>2</sup> These men were part of the 41st Bde (14th Divn), driven westwards soon after 2 p.m. See p. 385.

The 108th Brigade had for some time been under constant machine-gun fire; now by the withdrawal of the 61st Bde, its right flank was also exposed. Br.-General C. R. J. Griffiths accordingly conformed to the retirement and fell back on the railway, forming a left defensive flank on the left of the 61st, from the railway south-westward to Eaucourt. When about this time, 4.30 P.M., the Germans from Pithon again came on, recaptured Aubigny and later took Eaucourt and Brouchy, the 9/R. Inniskilling Fusiliers (109th Brigade) was obliged to fall back, the front of the 36th Division then presenting to the enemy a long narrow salient with a blunt top. On the right it was doubtfully connected to the 14th Divn by French cavalry; but its left rested on the trenches of the 36th Division on the Golancourt—Esmery Hallon line, the continuation of which then ran forward to Verlaines. Thus the 30th Division re-entrant was as deep as the 36th Division salient was sharp, making the XVIII. Corps front follow almost the shape of a letter S.

This salient part was to be still further narrowed by the loss of Cugny. Following closely the retiring 41st Bde (14th Divn) when it was split into two parts, the Germans were brought to a halt on the wooded slopes east of the Cugny valley by the fire of the 107th Bde. A fire fight then continued until between 5 and 6 P.M., when the enemy attacked again under a heavy trench-mortar barrage, and eventually broke the line of the 13th Entrenching Battalion, which was in the middle between the 1st and 2/R. Irish Rifles. This gap the Germans tried to exploit in the usual fashion, but fighting continued until nearly 10 P.M., when two Prussian grenadier regiments on the appeal of their officers, made a last effort in the moonlight and so succeeded in capturing Cugny.<sup>1</sup> The battalions of the 107th Bde then withdrew some 400 to 1,600 yards to the westward; the 2/R. Irish Rifles were reduced to eighty men, the 1/R. Irish Rifles being but little stronger.

Far from withdrawing the Ulster Division from the awkward salient which its front now formed, Major-General Nugent ordered the 61st Bde to hold on to the head of it at all costs. So Lieut.-Colonel H. G. R. Burges Short (a Somerset officer commanding the D.C.L.I.) formed the 7/D.C.L.I. and 7/Somerset L.I. on three sides of a square. He was, as will be seen, able to beat off all attacks until 11 A.M. on the 24th, when he received orders to retire.

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 104.

After dark, the commanders of the 61st and 109th Bdes met to concert measures to relieve the situation by counter-attack. It was decided that the 61st Bde should capture Eaucourt, while the 109th Bde, reinforced by three hundred stragglers, attacked Brouchy and the details of the 109th Bde (from Esmery Hallon), marching via Golancourt recaptured Aubigny. Only the first of these counter-attacks took place, and as a result the 284th Army Troops Company R.E., sent up from reserve, re-occupied Eaucourt without opposition about midnight. The 109th Bde details, on approaching Golancourt in a cold damp fog, soon after 1 A.M., came under heavy machine-gun fire from the enemy, who by this time was in possession of the village ; so it was unable to continue on its way towards Aubigny. Consequently the remaining operation, the attack against Brouchy, was abandoned. The arrival of the enemy in Golancourt had come about in very much the same way as the thrust towards Fins on the previous day. A single regiment had pressed on<sup>1</sup> and struck the right flank of the trenches which had been dug on the line Golancourt—Esmery Hallon during the day with a view to defence against an attack from the north. The garrison at the eastern end of the line, men of various units and stragglers, gave way, as it was imagined that the line had been completely turned. An order was given for the whole line to be evacuated and the troops holding it to retire about a thousand yards ; in this new position, as the enemy did not come on, they settled down.

Whilst the right and centre of the XVIII. Corps had been compelled to give ground owing to the forcing of the canal line at Jussy, Pithon and Ham, the left, the 20th Division (less the 61st Bde) on the Canizy—Béthencourt sector, had enjoyed comparative quiet. No Germans came in sight of it until 2 P.M., by which time the fog, of course, had disappeared. After some artillery and trench-mortar bombardment, attempts were made to cross the river, but, though made in force,<sup>2</sup> they failed under Lewis-gun fire. After dusk, “a great noise of traffic and shouting” was heard on the enemy’s side of the river, but machine and

<sup>1</sup> The 3rd Guard Grenadier Regiment, at 7 P.M., had been ordered to pass through the German lines, the other two regiments of the 5th Guard Division following, and push on via Aubigny and Golancourt to Freniches, 7 miles from the Somme, so that the division would drive into the British position a still deeper wedge. Owing to various difficulties, the advance from the railway did not begin until nearly midnight.

\* By the 50th and 5th Divisions.

Lewis-gun fire was "not long in restoring quiet", says one battalion account. Later an attempt to rush the Béthen-court bridge, the charges in which had not yet been fired, was easily repulsed. It would seem that the forcing of the Somme line at other points would not have been accomplished had it not been for the cover afforded by the fog.

The parts of the French 9th and 10th Divisions which had come up occupied a thin line on a concave curve,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles behind the S-shaped front of the XVIII. Corps, covering Villeselve—Le Plessis—l'Hôpital Farm (1 mile south-west of Esmery Hallon); but it was obvious that such a front line could not be maintained for long. None of the artillery of the corps had, however, been lost, the field artillery being nearly on the same line as the French reinforcements.

### *XIX. Corps*

On the 23rd at dawn, the 24th and 50th Divns of the XIX. Corps were holding a line some five miles east of the Somme, which formed the right front of the Péronne bridge-head, from Guizancourt to Brusle. Four miles behind them, in support, were the 9th, 1st and 2nd Dismounted Brigades, with the 66th Divn spread out along the Somme south of Péronne. The first troops of the 8th Division, from G.H.Q. reserve, which had come up the previous evening had been driven back to the Somme during the night, whilst the remainder of the division was beginning to arrive on the line, divisional headquarters at Villers-Carbonnel (2 miles west of Brie) receiving special attention from low-flying enemy aeroplanes, one of which was brought down by the fire of the orderly-room clerks. It had been hoped that the division would fill the gap existing between the right of the corps at Guizancourt and the left of the XVIII. Corps on the Somme at Béthencourt and thus complete the right flank of the bridgehead. The left of the XIX. Corps was in touch with the VII. Corps on the Cologne. The available field and horse artillery guns of the corps came to a total of 218; the heavy artillery, 88 guns, was in position 2,000 to 3,000 yards west of the Somme.

The report of the retirement of the entire XVIII. Corps behind the Somme did not reach Fifth Army headquarters until the early morning. On the receipt of the news, General Gough, who had expected that its rear guard would have remained holding a line between some point

on the river—he had suggested Ham—and the right of the XIX. Corps, immediately issued orders<sup>1</sup> for the latter corps to withdraw behind the Somme, leaving outposts east of the river. Its two forward divisions (24th and 50th) weak and exhausted, obviously could not be allowed to remain in such an isolated position ; indeed, one brigade at least of the 50th Divn had reported its line so thinly held that it was extremely doubtful whether it could hold off a severe attack next morning. There was some thought of sending up the three dismounted brigades to fill the four-mile gap between Guizancourt and the Somme ; but, as they were much below the establishment of three infantry battalions and worn out by marching, for which they were not trained, in addition to strenuous fighting, the idea had to be abandoned.

The retirement of the dismounted brigades of the 1st Cavalry Division, and of the 24th and 50th Divns, under XIX. Corps orders, was carried out with the greatest precision and deliberation from one position to another, the field guns remaining in action until the infantry had almost passed them. Favoured by the mist and protected by the excellent handling of the rear guards, the British obtained a good start of the enemy, who, however, pressed the pursuit with increasing vigour. But, with the exception of a few small parties which were cut off, all the troops were across the river by 3 P.M.

The dismounted cavalry moved first, the 1st and 2nd Brigades between 5 and 6 A.M., the 9th following two hours later. Their horses met them on the west side of the Somme, and pending the arrival of the 8th Division the 2nd Cavalry Brigade was made responsible for the crossing at Béthen-court, and the 9th for that at Pargny, 1½ miles further north ; the 1st went into reserve.

The 24th Divn began its retirement on Pargny at 8.30 A.M., covered by the horse artillery of the 1st Cavalry Division and one of its own field brigades. The 73rd and 17th Bdes, the right and centre, moved first. Although the ground to be crossed was bare and flat, and the rear-guard battalions suffered from machine-gun and field-gun fire, all the troops had passed through the Molignaux—Devise line, half-way to the river, by midday, and

<sup>1</sup> The written orders are timed, 9.20 A.M., but verbal and telephone orders were given much earlier, about 5 A.M., as divisions were able to issue theirs by 5.30 A.M., although some brigades did not receive them until 8 A.M.

then three battalions attached to the 72nd Bde holding it as rear guard were ordered to withdraw.<sup>1</sup> They were only just in time; for the enemy, working round the open right flank, reached the Somme south of Pargny almost as soon as they did and opened fire on them, although the 9th Cavalry Brigade and two companies of the 1/Worcestershire (8th Division) had advanced across the river to Falvy to cover the withdrawal. The 19th Hussars were waiting mounted in a quarry in the hillside east of Falvy for an opportunity to make a counter-attack: unfortunately their position was observed by an enemy aeroplane, and artillery fire soon opened on the quarry. A stampede of the horses ensued, and some of these galloping into the ranks of the 8th Hussars, who were coming up, caused further disorder. After a vain attempt to move round the hill and reach the crest from which the shell and machine-gun fire was being directed against them, the 19th Hussars moved towards St. Christ and the 8th towards Falvy.

Some confusion now arose regarding the destruction of the bridges over the canal, the Somme and its branches. The five structures at Béthencourt had been attended to by the engineers of the XVIII. Corps.<sup>2</sup> Then, during the morning, the XIX. Corps had telegraphed:—"All concerned. All bridges may be destroyed at discretion of divisional commanders, 50th, 24th, 1st Cavalry, according to circumstances and as soon as all troops have crossed. All such demolitions to be reported to corps."

There were five bridges on the single road leading from Falvy to Pargny, the last being over the canal, the others over branches of the Somme. These had all been prepared for demolition by the 1st Siege Company R.E. (XVIII. Corps), whose parties were standing by them. When the 72nd Bde had crossed, Lieut.-Colonel L. J. Wyatt, commanding the engineer company, not having authority to destroy the bridges, sent an orderly to 24th Divn headquarters for instructions. Meantime, the masonry arch of the bridge over one of the wider branches of the Somme had been struck by a German shell<sup>3</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> These units were the 24th Divisional Depot Battalion, the 19th Entrenching Battalion and 2 of the 8 companies of the 12/Sherwood Foresters (Pioneers).

<sup>2</sup> It was subsequently discovered that one of the two bridges over the canal, consisting of timber decking on four heavy steel joists, had not been destroyed; the work was done by the 1st Field Squadron R.E. after dusk, as it was impossible to approach the canal in the vicinity by daylight.

<sup>3</sup> This is the evidence of officers of the 8th Hussars.

rendered impassable for traffic. The 8th Hussars started to ride to St. Christ, but on the way heard that the bridge at that place was broken, and returned to Falvy, where they and one squadron of the 19th tried to cross by the wreckage, eked out by planks. The horses were unable to get down from the abutment to the low level of the planks, so swimming was attempted ; but the banks were so boggy that the horses sank in as soon as they entered the stream. By this time machine-gun fire on the bridges was lively, many horses were hit and became unmanageable, so that eventually they had to be abandoned. The dismounted men managed to get over and to defend the eastern side of Pargny until relieved by infantry. A detached company of the 9/East Surrey south of Falvy, was also cut off, only a few men escaping by swimming, after putting up a good fight which delayed the enemy. The canal bridge, the most important, had been left to the last moment, and at 4.30 P.M. it was fired by the sergeant in charge on his own responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

The main body of the 19th Hussars was more fortunate, as it found a passage intact at Epénancourt, a mile north of Falvy.

The 50th Divn retired in a similar manner to the 24th, but a little later, towards 9 A.M. ; the 149th Bde was directed to cross the Somme at St. Christ, the 150th at Brie, and the 151st at Eterpigny. Thanks to the mist, the enemy had not discovered the withdrawal of the division from the Green Line on the previous night, and began the day by a bombardment of the empty trenches ; his infantry then followed up the barrage about 7 A.M. Finding that the defenders had vanished the Germans after a time continued their advance, but, as they still encountered patches of mist, they did not press forward rapidly. The majority of the troops of the 50th Divn were thus able to get away without serious fighting.

At Vraignes, in the centre, however, just north of the Roman road at the shoulder of the line, the Germans pushed forward motor machine-guns in the mist and nearly caught the whole of the 1/4th East Yorkshire (150th Bde).

<sup>1</sup> The leads had been cut and repaired several times and were intact, but the charges having most likely been loosened by a shell striking the bridge, the demolition was only partially successful. Lieut. F. G. Bayley, 1st Field Squadron R.E., obtained more explosive, and a corporal and six sappers laid fresh charges under heavy machine-gun fire and exploded them. On going forward to inspect the result, which was successful, Lieut. Bayley was killed.

One company was completely cut off, but fought until its ammunition was finished and only thirty men were left alive. The other three companies retired across a thousand yards of open ground under heavy rifle fire, so inaccurate that there were practically no casualties. The forward platoons of the 1/6th Northumberland Fusiliers (149th Bde), just south of Vraignes, held on until the Germans charged them, and were last seen fighting hand-to-hand against vastly superior numbers.

The rest of the division reached the Athies le Mesnil half-way line unmolested, and continued its further retirement like the 24th Divn, at midday, over similar flat and open ground. The enemy now followed quickly and attempted to envelop the flanks of the rear guards, particularly about 1.30 P.M. from Doingt on the north. The latter place had only just been evacuated by the VII. Corps and some sharp fighting took place there. At Brie the enemy followed up so closely that the 1/4 East Yorkshire holding a bridgehead about a mile and a quarter from the village, had to be supported by the 1/5th Green Howards and a battalion of the 8th Division, which had just arrived, in order to give time for transport to pass the bridge. But the crossing of the Somme was carried out as planned by about 3 P.M., except that one battalion of the 149th Bde passed at Brie instead of St. Christ.

The lateral bridges over the Omignon had been destroyed as the troops retired, and also some subsidiary bridges over the Somme. At 3.45 P.M., the G.O.C. 149th Bde gave orders for the firing of the charges in the bridges at St. Christ.<sup>1</sup> The explosions were successful, but the débris of the girders and roadway left the passages still practicable for infantry.<sup>2</sup>

At Brie the bridges carrying the great chaussée, the Roman road, having been supplemented by auxiliary passages on either side, presented a task requiring a large quantity of explosives. The French authorities had desired that the demolition of all these bridges should be left and the canal kept open for traffic to the last moment, so the final preparations were made under gun fire. Fortunately, most of the shells fell on the marshes and failed to explode.

<sup>1</sup> The main road crossed the canal and two branches of the river on steel girder bridges (designed to carry tanks) just completed by U.S. Engineers.

<sup>2</sup> It was subsequently reported that the "concrete bridge" was intact, but there was no concrete bridge at St. Christ.

Between 2 and 3 P.M. five British tanks appeared on the eastern bank intending to cross.<sup>1</sup> They could not do so; for even the larger bridges—"A" class, built of lattice girders used as "through" spans—although sufficiently strong, were too narrow to admit of a tank crossing with its sponsons on. There was no time to take these off, so the tanks were set on fire and abandoned.<sup>2</sup> All the charges in the bridges were then exploded. It was subsequently found that the rear guard of the 1/4th Green Howards had been cut off, but it managed to cross by the débris of the bridges.

After passing the Somme, the 24th Divn, by corps orders had continued on to Licourt (3 miles north-west of Pargny), subsequently lending two battalions to the 8th Division; but the 50th Divn, with the 1st Cavalry Division, was directed to remain on the river, holding the sector Béthencourt to Eterpigny<sup>3</sup>—where the 66th Divn took up the defence—until relieved by the 8th Division.<sup>4</sup> The 24th Brigade (Br.-General R. C. Haig) had by 7 A.M. begun to take position in the centre from Pargny (exclusive) to St. Christ (inclusive), and also held Pargny for a time in conjunction with the 9th Cavalry Brigade, which it released at 5 P.M. The 23rd Brigade (Br.-General G. W. St. G. Grogan) arrived next in the St. Christ (exclusive)—Eterpigny bridge sector, but it did not complete the relief of the 50th Divn until 5 P.M.; it was one battalion short, and this unit did not arrive until the early morning of the 24th. The last brigade, the 25th (Br.-General C. Coffin), came up in the evening under some shell fire and relieved the 2nd Cavalry Brigade, on the right of the corps front, the 2/East Lancas-

<sup>1</sup> One of them had been seen coming along just ahead of the German infantry, making splendid shooting.

<sup>2</sup> The 5th Tank Battalion, which had been working with the XIX. Corps during the retreat, was already reduced to 17 machines, and of these it had to abandon 14 on this day.

<sup>3</sup> The XIX. Corps orders issued in the morning for the retirement had directed the 24th Divn to villages a few miles to the north-west of Licourt, and the 50th to Estrées (4 miles west of Brie); but circumstances compelled the latter division to remain further forward.

<sup>4</sup> The original orders to the 8th Division directed it to occupy the right half of the Péronne bridgehead, and it was expected that it would have 24 hours in which to dig in. The brigades detrained at Chaulnes, Nesle and Rosières on the Amiens-Ham railway during the night of the 22nd/23rd, and were to march to Athies, east of the Somme. This was found impossible, and it proved an impracticable task to get new orders to the units on a pitch-dark night, with the roads crowded with troops and transport in the "devastated area" where maps were of little use.

The formal handing over from Major-General Jackson (50th) to Major-General W. C. G. Heneker (8th), took place at 7 A.M. on 24th.

shire on the right establishing contact with the 11/Rifle Brigade of the 20th Division (XVIII. Corps) at Béthencourt. The brigades of the 1st Cavalry Division were then withdrawn into reserve, and the division (less two batteries R.H.A.) concentrated at Curchy (5 miles south-west of Pargny); but at 11.20 P.M. General Gough issued orders for its transfer, with only one R.H.A. battery, from the XIX. to the VII. Corps, and at 6 A.M. on the 24th the division marched via Chaulnes to Cappy (8 miles west of Péronne).

On relief by the 8th, the 50th Divn was to have gone into reserve, but this move was found impracticable. Of the infantry only the 150th Bde was fully released, and marched via Barleux to Belloy (4 miles west of Brie); of the 149th, two battalions went into reserve at Misery (4 miles south-west of Brie), one being left to support the 23rd Brigade (8th Division); of the 151st, one battalion was already attached to the 66th Divn, the other two, at 8.30 P.M., took over the southernmost thousand yards of that division's front, freeing the 198th Bde to move to the left and fill a 1½-mile gap which had arisen between it and the 39th Division (VII. Corps), whose flank was at Biaches, on the Somme west of Péronne. This operation was not completed until 2.30 A.M. on the 24th.

The 66th Divn had had an undisturbed forenoon; but, in view of the fact that the VII. Corps was no longer on its immediate left, while fighting was still in progress east of the Somme, all available machine guns were sent to that flank. In addition the reserve brigade (199th) was ordered by Major-General Malcolm to extend the front to cover the bridge, locally known as Bristol Bridge, leading south from Péronne. At 8 P.M., after the 50th Divn had been reported west of the Somme, the bridges over the river on the 66th Divn front were blown up, but Bristol Bridge was left standing until the 16th Divn (VII. Corps) had crossed.<sup>1</sup> During the rest of the afternoon there were artillery duels across the river, but no determined effort was made by the Germans to force a passage. During the night, whilst the various moves mentioned above were in progress, several attempts were made by the enemy to force a passage of the Somme on the front of the 8th Division. About

<sup>1</sup> Major-General Sir A. Hull had sent back an officer to stand by the bridge to see that it was not blown up prematurely. The railway bridge, south of Péronne, for which the railway authorities were responsible, was not blown up; all photographs taken shortly after showed that it was intact.

9 P.M. a party succeeded in rushing the ruins of the canal bridge at Pargny and occupying the village. An immediate counter-attack made by about seventy men of the 1/Worcestershire and 2/Rifle Brigade, in three parties, drove the Germans back with the loss of many killed, twenty prisoners and four machine guns.<sup>1</sup> By this time no less than eight German divisions, among them the *4th Guard, 18th, 19th, 25th, 28th, and 208th*, had been identified on the 8th Division front.

A more serious attack was made a little later at St. Christ, where several platoons,<sup>2</sup> using planks and duckboards to cross the stream, succeeded in gaining a footing. The 1/Sherwood Foresters, holding this sector, then barred the enemy's further progress with rifle and Lewis-gun fire, and a counter-attack organized soon after midnight, in which Lieut.-Colonel T. H. Watson (of the Worcestershire, but commanding the Foresters) was killed, drove the enemy back to his own bank, leaving many dead behind him. The artillery, too, found many excellent targets as the enemy attempted to swarm down to the canal and over the damaged bridges.

These successes seemed a good omen ; having a canal and wide, marshy river flats on its front, there seemed no reason why the XIX. Corps, the whole of which was established on the western bank, should not hold out indefinitely.

### *VII. Corps*

The VII. Corps began the day holding the Green Line from Hamel ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles west of Roisel) to Equancourt,  $7\frac{1}{2}$  miles further north, with its left temporarily extended another mile north-eastwards by the 99th Bde (2nd Division) attached from the V. Corps. The mission of this brigade was to gain touch with the right of the 47th Division (V. Corps), about half a mile north of Fins, so as to ensure that there should be no gap between the VII. and V. Corps, that is between the Fifth and Third Armies, of which they were the flank formations. This object was not attained—whether through failure of either the 99th Bde or the 47th Division troops to find the point of junction indicated, owing to the darkness, or for some other

<sup>1</sup> For organizing and leading this, Major F. C. Roberts, commanding the 1/Worcestershire, was awarded the V.C.

<sup>2</sup> Of the *24th Regiment (6th Division)*, which had crossed the Somme at the same place in 1914. "Regt. No. 24".

reason, is not clear. All that is certain is that contact was not established between the two corps, whilst close to the gap was Fins, where the enemy had made a thrust almost into the VII. Corps line on the previous evening. The left of the corps was thus placed in a difficult position, which caused increasing anxiety throughout the 23rd ; and not without good reason, since during the day the 47th Division was driven north-westward off its proper line of retreat and so rendered the Third Army unable to carry out the orders of G.H.Q. which made it responsible for keeping touch with the Fifth Army. At night the gap between the VII. Corps and V. Corps was wider than it had been in the morning.

On the right of the VII. Corps, too, the position at dawn was not satisfactory. The left of the XIX. Corps, as already related, had settled down during the previous night about two miles to the rear of the flank of the VII. Corps. Fortunately, the enemy did not realize this circumstance soon enough to take advantage of it, and the 16th Divn on this flank was able to withdraw without serious interference.

The corps front was covered by 235 field guns, in action on or about the line Tincourt—Aizecourt le Haut—Moislains—Manancourt ; and 128 heavy guns on the approximate line Bussu—Aizecourt le Haut—Moislains. Of the latter, three brigades and the 8-inch and 9.2-inch howitzers of the three other brigades, a total of 76 guns, were in the morning ordered to withdraw to about the line Bray—Fricourt (3 miles east of Albert) to cover the " Maricourt Line ". This position, about ten miles behind the Green Line, ran from the Somme at Suzanne (8 miles west of Péronne) northwards in front of Maricourt and Montauban. The remaining three brigades of heavy artillery, with a total of 52 guns, were allotted one each to the 16th, 21st and 9th Divisions. The orders for the move did not reach the heavy artillery until the afternoon, and all the brigades were in action during the first half of the day.

At 4.40 A.M., the G.O.C. XIX. Corps informed the G.O.C. VII. Corps by telephone that his corps, by orders of the Fifth Army commander, was going to retire behind the Somme. Lieut.-General Congreve pointed out that this move would leave his troops to effect a daylight withdrawal with their right flank exposed. To this Lieut.-General Watts replied that the retirement of the XIX. Corps behind the Somme was a matter of necessity.

The withdrawal of the VII. Corps was now clearly unavoidable. A warning order, giving the line to be occupied in the case of withdrawal with a view to the necessary preparations being made, had been sent out to divisions at 2.55 A.M.,<sup>1</sup> and no time was lost in issuing the appropriate executive orders. Between 5 and 5.45 A.M., all four divisions were instructed by telephone to fight a rear-guard action back to the north-south line Doingt (1½ miles south-east of Péronne)—Bussu—Aizecourt le Haut—Moislains (on the Tortille)—Manancourt, three miles in rear, where the artillery was already deployed. General Gough, on learning of this order, confirmed the decision of Lieut.-General Congreve; he made the proviso that the Green Line on the left of the corps from Nurlu (inclusive) northwards should not be given up till the Third Army was also ready to withdraw. In the event, enemy pressure prevented effect being given to this latter instruction. There was, in fact, little co-ordination of the retreat or liaison even between brigades or battalions, units moving back because their flanks were menaced, or because they saw others retiring.

The first withdrawal of the VII. Corps to the line defined in the 5 A.M. orders will be described by divisions from right to left, with the reminder that fog persisted in this area until 10 A.M.

The 16th Divn, on the right, now very weak,<sup>2</sup> began to retire between 6 and 7 A.M. The enemy, apparently, did not notice the movement, so that it was carried out without interruption except from an occasional shell. Between ten and eleven o'clock, the division was on its new position from Doingt to the Bois des Flacques, two thousand yards northwards.

Further to the left, the 39th Division had two brigades in the line. About 8 A.M. the third brigade (116th), had been sent back to dig in on the line to which the G.O.C. had been warned his division might have to retire. The two front brigades received the order to retire at 6.15 A.M. The 118th Brigade got away without much difficulty;

<sup>1</sup> As a result of a visit of Major-Gen. N. Malcolm (66th Divn, XIX. Corps) to Major-Gen. Sir A. Hull (16th Divn, flank division of the VII. Corps) during the night.

<sup>2</sup> The 47th Bde consisted of two weak battalions; the 48th had to be reinforced by the 157th Field Company R.E., and the 11/Hampshire (P.); the 49th was reduced to two companies, plus the 17th Entrenching Battalion.

the right battalion was attacked from the south just as it was moving, but in the fog was able to break off the action and slip away. The brigade did not halt on the Aizecourt line, but, by divisional instructions, in order to form a reserve, retired through the 116th Brigade and concentrated at St. Denis, the northern suburb of Péronne.

The 117th Brigade, on the left, had only the 17/ K.R.R.C. in the front line, in a salient of the Green Line at the north-east corner of the Bois de Tincourt. The battalion was attacked at dawn under cover of fog, but, after fierce fighting, drove the enemy off with severe casualties. This opportune success enabled the whole brigade to withdraw between 8 and 9 A.M. unmolested, and it took position between Bussu and Aizecourt le Haut on the left of the 116th Brigade.<sup>1</sup>

The orders for retirement to the Aizecourt line were issued by the 21st Divn at 7.30 A.M. The fragments of the 62nd and 110th Bdes were formed into a single brigade under the command of Lieut.-Colonel B. D. Fisher (17th Lancers), commanding the 1/Lincolnshire of the 62nd.

Meanwhile, at 7.20 A.M., the enemy had begun a heavy bombardment and, as the trench of the Green Line was only spit-locked a foot deep, many casualties occurred. Before the orders for withdrawal had reached the units of the 62nd and 110th Bdes on the left of the division, a sudden infantry attack in the mist broke through the 110th's line between the Bois de Gurlu and the Bois de l'Epinette, and spread southwards into that of the 62nd. The battalions were driven out of their position, and those of the 110th on the left retired nearly a mile to the Péronne—Nurlu road. Here they held the enemy, thanks to the effective rifle fire of the reserve, which was still in the Bois de Gurlu, until nearly 11 A.M., when orders arrived to withdraw to the Aizecourt line; this move was carried out without difficulty. The units of the 62nd Bde had received their orders earlier in the day, and, after being forced from the Green Line, had fought a rear-guard action back to the Aizecourt line.

The 64th Brigade (with all three battalions and the 18/Gloucestershire, Pioneers, in the front line) on the right

<sup>1</sup> The command of the 89th Division had up till now been in the hands of Br.-General M. L. Hornby; but at 8 A.M. Major-General E. Feetham, recalled from leave, resumed his position, and Br.-General Hornby returned to the 116th Brigade.

of the 21st Divn, fared better. The German infantrymen, advancing at 7 A.M., preceded by a line of machine guns, though not visible until they were thirty yards from the wire, were shot down with great slaughter.

Another attack came an hour later. Again fire was withheld till good targets appeared, and then opened with such effect that the enemy retired, leaving many dead and wounded on the wire. A small counter-attack even was initiated, and it captured some prisoners and two machine guns, which were then used against the enemy.

So far, the fight had gone well, but the situation was soon to change. The German success over the other brigade, 62nd/110th, had its inevitable effect. The left of the 64th Brigade was carried away in the retirement of the 62nd Bde on its left, so that the 9/K.O.Y.L.I. and 1/East Yorkshire, which so far had successfully repulsed all attacks on their front, were now threatened from their left rear. It was 9 A.M., and at this moment orders to withdraw reached the two battalions. To execute them was difficult; for the enemy who had broken through further north was already in Templeux la Fosse, on the direct line of retreat. To make matters worse, the ground immediately in rear of the position sloped up hill, so that every man on leaving the trench was exposed to the full view of the enemy. Nevertheless, the attempt was made. A detour southwards to avoid Templeux la Fosse led to loss of direction; the Aizecourt line was passed over in error, but the greater part of the two battalions eventually reached their brigade headquarters at Feuillaucourt, behind Mont St. Quentin, 3,000 yards N.N.W. of Péronne. The 15/Durham L.I., therefore, was the only complete unit of the 64th Brigade to take up its assigned position in front of Aizecourt le Haut; to the south of this village there was a gap of about three-quarters of a mile as the left of the 39th Division did not extend to the village.

At 5.20 A.M.—that is before General Gough's views were known to the corps—the G.O.C. of the 9th Division (which included the 99th Bde attached), occupying the Green Line from the south of Nurlu through Equancourt to half a mile north of Fins, received verbal orders brought by a General Staff officer of the VII. Corps. He was to hold the Green Line with rear guards, and retire to a north-south line, just behind the Canal du Nord, extending from Moislains (inclusive) northwards along the east edge of Vaux Wood, in front of Manancourt and Etricourt;

and he was to form a flank running thence eastwards to connect with the 47th Division north of Fins.

Long before the divisional orders for the retirement (issued at 6.30 A.M.) could reach the front-line troops, they were engaged with the enemy. In the area of the 27th Brigade on the right, a bombardment of artillery, trench mortars eventually joining in, had been begun at an early hour, and soon after 7 A.M. the infantry was engaged in a fire fight in the fog with the advancing Germans. The attack in front was successfully held, and another directed against the right flank, which was exposed by the retirement of the left of the 21st Divn, was likewise warded off with the help of a counter-attack by a party of South Africans led by a mounted officer. But the fight continued and when the divisional orders for withdrawal were received about 9 A.M., the flank battalion (6/K.O.S.B.) was still hotly engaged. The retirement, thanks to the fog and the gallantry of the rear guards, was nevertheless carried out—in a series of bounds—though at the cost of considerable casualties, as the enemy did his best to follow. To add to the difficulties, it was not easy to find the bridges across the great cutting of the Canal du Nord at Moislains, as they were not marked on the map, and some men wandering along the canal bank were actually sniped by German scouts. It was not until 11 A.M. that the brigade was in its new position on the ridge behind Moislains and on the eastern edge of Vaux Wood, a few hundred yards west of the canal. The corps orders specially stated that Moislains was to be held, but part of this village lay on the eastern side of the Tortille, and the divisional commander, Br.-General Tudor, decided that the position could best be denied to the enemy by occupying the high ground behind the village.

The 26th Brigade, on the left of the 27th, was similarly attacked about 7 A.M., but the enemy made no impression on it, and was repulsed with heavy loss. It was not until about 10 A.M., after orders to retire had arrived, that the 8/Black Watch, which was holding the front line, began to fall back, the two other battalions remaining in position to cover the retirement. There had been delay before the orders reached the 26th Brigade, and the 27th had already moved off, so the enemy was able to attack the Black Watch on its right flank at the moment of withdrawal. At first it was hard pressed, but the fire of the two other battalions became so effective as it fell back, that a counter-

attack could be made, which resulted in many casualties being inflicted on the advancing Germans. The bridge over the canal was blown up a little prematurely before the last company of the Black Watch could get across, and the men had to swim over under fire. A little before 2 P.M. the new position was occupied from the north-east corner of Vaux Wood to a sugar factory (marked "Beetroot factory" on the map) at the cross roads 700 yards north of Etricourt.

At 9.50 A.M. the 99th Bde, responsible for the flank connecting the 26th Brigade to the V. Corps (Third Army), issued its orders for the withdrawal, which was carried out unmolested. Br.-General Tudor had realized that this flank of over four thousand yards was too long to be held by a brigade little over a thousand men strong, and also that the Third Army was exposed to increasing danger by the delay of the V. Corps in leaving the Salient; he therefore motored over to Villers au Flos for a personal interview with Lieut.-General Fanshawe. He hoped to convince him first of the enormous weight of the attack against the Fifth Army; secondly, of the weak state to which the divisions of that Army had been reduced; and, lastly, of the obvious plan of the enemy to cut in behind the Third Army. The headquarters of the V. Corps had already moved back; but Br.-General Tudor was able to communicate by telephone with the Brigadier-General General Staff, V. Corps, and to obtain authority to order the right brigade of the 47th Division (the 140th) to extend its right 2,000 yards westward to the north end of Equancourt. This order was sent by the 9th Division at 11.15 A.M., but the brigade concerned never received it. The sector from the sugar factory to Equancourt had been allotted to the 99th Bde, which in endeavouring to keep connection between the 9th and 47th Divisions, became separated into two parts.

So far the retirement had proceeded as ordered to the positions indicated. But in the afternoon enemy pressure became too strong; the line could not be held; and the whole VII. Corps was forced to make a further withdrawal of two to four miles.

From about 11.30 A.M. the enemy artillery persistently shelled the Doingt—Bussu position, occupied by the 16th Divn and 89th Division, and between noon and 1 P.M. his infantry began to make itself felt. Major-Generals Hull

and Feetham, after consultation and riding round to see their brigadiers, had already made arrangements for a further withdrawal should this become necessary, although intending to cover Péronne as long as possible. They had to take into account that, at the moment, a mass of refugees and transport, including ambulance columns evacuating the hospitals and casualty clearing stations, was passing through the 1½-mile defile formed by the town. So good were the regulations for traffic that there was no serious block on the streets, but many stores, even those of the Expeditionary Force Canteen, had to be set on fire.

To cover a withdrawal, a battalion of the 16th Divn (1/R. Dublin Fusiliers), with six machine-guns, was sent across the river Cologne at Doingt in order to hold the high ground south-west of the village, protect the flank of the division and gain touch with the 50th Divn. The 118th Brigade, as we have seen, had already been sent back to St. Denis, the northern suburb of Péronne. It was now ordered to move a short distance to the north to cover the important hill of Mont St. Quentin, behind Bussu and north of Péronne.

By 1 P.M. the enemy attack was becoming very heavy all along the line and a retirement of both the 16th Divn and 39th Division was ordered. Thanks to the 1/R. Dublin Fusiliers, whose position covered the Cologne defile, and to a particularly fine rear-guard action fought by the 157th Field Company R.E. and the 11/Hampshire (Pioneers), holding the 48th Bde sector in and around Doingt, the enemy's advance was for a time checked so effectively that the 16th Divn, the length of its columns of march sadly reduced by the previous fighting, was able to carry out its withdrawal through the southern part of Péronne. Crossing the Somme by the Bristol Bridge between 3 and 6 P.M., it took position behind the river about half a mile west of Biaches, with a brigade stationed for a while east of the village, in touch with the 66th Divn (XIX. Corps).

In the 39th Division, the 117th Brigade was first sent back to the left of the 118th, covering Mont St. Quentin. The 116th Brigade was now alone, and about 1.40 P.M., Br.-General M. L. Hornby being seriously wounded by a shell, Lieut.-Colonel W. C. Millward again took command. It was not until 2.30 P.M., when both flanks were menaced by turning movements, that the brigade began to withdraw

on Mont St. Quentin. Its right battalion, the 13/R. Sussex, was nearly cut off, but fell back south-westwards; it then crossed the Somme at the Bristol Bridge and joined the 66th Divn, remaining with it for two days. The rest of the brigade, on arrival at Mont St. Quentin, was sent further back to hold a rear-guard position in front of Cléry (3 miles north-west of Péronne), where a passage of the Somme existed.

Next, about 3 P.M., the 118th Brigade was given orders to cross at Hallé (between Péronne and Cléry), this route being also allotted to the artillery. After crossing, the brigade was to entrench a line along the Somme from Biaches to Ommécourt, opposite Cléry, and the divisional R.E. were sent to assist generally and to demolish the bridges. An hour later the enemy was advancing in large numbers on Mont St. Quentin, and the 117th Brigade, with the artillery, was forced to retire. The 117th fell back on the 116th in position covering Cléry, and most of the guns were got away. The 282nd Brigade R.F.A., the last of the artillery, remained in action until the infantry was passing through it, engaging the enemy over open sights. Whilst limbering up, it was caught by enemy artillery fire: eleven guns were hit by shells, and heavy casualties in men and horses inflicted, yet all but one of the remaining guns were got away. A single gun remained hidden in a copse until it could fire three rounds point-blank into the head of a German column and then was galloped off to safety.

The stand on Mont St. Quentin had not been without its effect. The roads leading westward from Péronne and Cléry were still crowded with retiring transport, and in this area, the site of the old Somme battlefield, movement across country off the roads was almost impossible. Fortunately, the few enemy aeroplanes which appeared flew at a great height, and their fire was entirely ineffective. The transport on the Cléry road being already under shell fire, it was diverted on to the adjacent railway line; had the enemy been able to push forward his machine guns and artillery observing officers to the commanding ground at Mont St. Quentin earlier in the day, the transport might have been totally destroyed. As it was, most of it was able to get clear.

Another stand was made by the 116th and 117th Brigades in their new position in front of Cléry. The 11/R. Sussex of the 116th then passed through the 117th and crossed the Somme at Cléry, leaving the 1/1st Hertfordshire

west of the village.<sup>1</sup> It was followed, about 6 P.M., by the whole of the 117th, the four battalions then concentrating at Feuillères, about two miles west of Cléry. During the night, however, the 11/R. Sussex was sent back across the river to rejoin the 1/1st Hertfordshire and support the right of the 21st Divn. The 118th Brigade was by this time in position behind the Somme with its right at Biaches and its left at Buscourt, so the 16th Divn (less artillery, which remained in position under the 39th Division) was ordered into reserve at Cappy (on the Somme, 7 miles west of Biaches). To fill the gap east of Biaches, the 66th Divn as we have seen, had extended its left by a move of the 198th Bde and so gained touch with the 118th Brigade at Biaches, about 2.40 A.M. on the 24th. Thus the 39th Division ended the day's retirement with two brigades south and one (less a battalion) north of the Somme.

The 21st Divn had been left on the line Aizecourt le Haut—Moislains (exclusive). Between it and the 39th Division on the right there had grown a gap of three-quarters of a mile. On the left the 9th Division was on the high ground behind Moislains, but not in the village itself, so that soon after midday the 21st had both flanks somewhat in the air. Such a position could not be maintained long by a very weak division with the enemy attacking in front and pressing forward on either side. About 1 P.M., after the field artillery had done great execution on the enemy advancing down the long slope opposite the position, it was ordered to retire behind the Tortille. The single battalion which represented the 64th Bde, and the pioneers with it, rejoined the other two battalions of the brigade, which had gone back earlier to Feuillaucourt, and position was then taken by the 64th Bde along a spur running northwards from that village. The combined 62nd/110th Bde formed on its left on the high ground overlooking Allaines from the north-west. The rear guard crossed the Tortille on trees brought down by the firing of the charges for the destruction of the bridges. On the right, the 39th Division at this time still held Mont St. Quentin and, on the left, but with a gap of a thousand yards or more intervening, was the 9th Division west of Moislains.

Soon after 4 P.M. the right flank of the new position was turned by the enemy's capture of Mont St. Quentin, by which also the whole position was overlooked, and the 21st

<sup>1</sup> The third battalion of the brigade, the 18/R. Sussex, was still with the 66th Divn.

Divn had to continue its retirement. The 64th Bde withdrew to a line with its right on the Somme immediately east of Cléry, and extending northwards along a spur for about two thousand yards. The 62nd/110th Bde at first only fell back about a mile to an old line of trenches covering Bouchavesnes on the south-east. Here it remained till dusk, and then moved back to extend the line of the 64th Bde northwards. The line occupied was broken in echelon, for the right of the 62nd (1st and 2/Lincolnshire) was alongside the 64th, but its left (14/Northumberland Fusiliers, Pioneers) and the 110th Bde were one thousand yards in rear, and in line with the South African Brigade, which was in reserve to the 9th Division.

As its first troubles occurred on the left wing, and these had their repercussions southwards on the other parts of the divisional front, the operations of the 9th Division are best described from left to right.

At 1 P.M. the 99th Bde, on the left, held a flank facing south from the sugar factory north of Etricourt as far as Equancourt, designed to connect the Fifth and Third Armies. On the right was the 1/R. Berkshire (less two companies detached to the left of the line); but between it and the two left battalions of the brigade (1/K.R.R.C. and 23/Royal Fusiliers), which had closed to the left to get touch with the 47th Division, there was a gap, and the greater part of the brigade drifted away from the 9th Division, under whose orders it was, and fought mixed up with troops of the 47th Division. Their action is therefore described in the narrative of V. Corps operations.

The two companies of the Berkshire left with the 9th Division became engaged with the enemy when he came on at 1 P.M., and fought a series of hard rear-guard actions

**Map 7.** back to a position at Four Winds Farm (2 miles south of Ytres), where they joined up with the 140th Brigade (47th Division) on the left, and with the 26th Brigade on the right, thus making the junction of the two Armies. This line was held till about 7 P.M., when a fresh attack under a heavy barrage drove the 140th Brigade out of its position, and the Berkshire were forced to retire north-westwards to Rocquigny, thus altogether losing touch with the 26th Brigade.

**Map 6.** The 26th Brigade, next on the right, had already experienced great difficulty in keeping touch with the 99th, when during the afternoon it was called on to conform to the first retirement of the companies of the Berkshire on its left. By so doing it uncovered Manancourt and Etricourt.

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It now withdrew to a new very extended position nearly three miles long, the right being at Government Farm (a mile south-east of Saillisel), and its left at Four Winds Farm, where, as stated above, it again joined the Berkshire. In the enemy attack at 7 P.M., which resulted in the retirement of the 140th Brigade and of the Berkshire, the 8/Black Watch, the left battalion of the 26th Brigade held its ground, forming a defensive flank facing east. Here it inflicted considerable losses on the advancing Germans, who, revived by stores found in the canteen at Etricourt, had charged to within a hundred yards of the British line, only to be mown down and stopped. This mishap arrested German progress near Four Winds Farm for some time. An attack against Government Farm, however, about 8 P.M., drove back the extreme right of the brigade, which withdrew a short distance to a line north of St. Pierre Vaast Wood, where it held its ground against further enemy efforts.

The 27th Brigade, on the right of the 9th Division, holding the high ground west of Moislains and the east edge of Vaux Wood, successfully maintained its position throughout the day. Anxiety was felt mainly for the left, particularly when the 26th Brigade had to fall further back during the afternoon and the enemy poured into Manancourt ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles north of Moislains, on the Tortille), behind that flank. A hot fight ensued, but the 12/Royal Scots, the left battalion of the 27th Brigade, with the assistance of a company of the 9/Seaforth Highlanders (Pioneers), sent up from reserve, succeeded in holding its own.

Meanwhile, about 4 P.M., the 9th Division had received orders from the VII. Corps to fall back on to the "Red Line": Bouchavesnes—east edge of St. Pierre Vaast Wood—a point 500 yards east of Saillisel. The South African Brigade, in reserve to the 9th Division, was at that time on the Epine de Malassise, the high ground between Moislains and Bouchavesnes. Br.-General H. H. Tudor (9th Division) visited the brigade here about 4.30 P.M., gave Br.-General Dawson the corps orders, and directed him to move back his brigade, as soon as it was dark, which meant about 6 P.M., to a reserve position on the ridge west of Bouchavesnes. At the same time he was instructed to pass on an order to the 27th Brigade to withdraw to the east edge of St. Pierre Vaast Wood.

The South African Brigade did not begin to move off to its new position until after 8 P.M. A deep valley, in

which lies the Bois Marrières, indents the southern extremity of the ridge west of Bouchavesnes, thus forming a subsidiary feature east of the main one. The divisional commander had intended this subsidiary ridge to be the reserve position ; Br.-General Dawson understood him to mean the main ridge, and accordingly withdrew there. His mistake was thus the cause of the break back in the front of the 62nd Bde already mentioned. There was yet another mishap. Charged with conveying the divisional orders to the 27th Brigade, the South African Brigade had made every effort to do so ; but Br.-General W. D. Croft had just changed the position of his headquarters, and so delay occurred in finding him. The flank battalion of the South Africans duly warned the 6/K.O.S.B., the adjoining unit of the 27th Brigade, of the intended retirement ; but the commanding officer, having received no orders from his brigade, did not conform. Before the orders arrived the 6/K.O.S.B. was attacked, and being forced to retire, formed a defensive right flank in a small wood between Moislains and St. Pierre Vaast Wood. The 27th Brigade did not receive the orders until 7.30 p.m. and then the other two battalions of the brigade were withdrawn to the eastern edge of St. Pierre Vaast Wood. Later in the night the 9/Seaforth Highlanders (Pioneers) was brought up from brigade reserve to hold the right of this line in relief of the 6/K.O.S.B., which was withdrawn into reserve behind the right.

In its new position, the 27th Brigade was out of touch on either flank. On the right, it expected to find the South African Brigade immediately behind Bouchavesnes ; it was, as we know, a thousand yards further west. On the left, as has been already mentioned, the right of the 26th Brigade, near Government Farm, had been driven back by an attack about 8 p.m. A considerable gap had thus been created on that side, and into it the enemy found his way during the night, making a determined attack on the north-east corner of St. Pierre Vaast Wood. At one time the 12/R. Scots was nearly surrounded ; but, using the headquarters company as a last reserve to clear its left flank, it eventually beat off the attack with complete success.

Meanwhile, Br.-General Tudor had gone on from the South African Brigade to the 26th Brigade. He was convinced that unless his brigades could be closed in they were in imminent danger of being enveloped and destroyed ;

also that his division could not be stretched out to keep touch with the Third Army, which was apparently still hoping to cling to the Flesquieres Salient. The situation of the 26th Brigade he found to be critical ; the line of nearly three miles was far too long to be held adequately by one brigade. Both flanks, indeed, were threatened with envelopment, and for it to remain in such a position until the morning was to court disaster. Moreover, the whole brigade was on ground which ought to have been occupied by V. Corps troops ; for the Army boundary ran along the northern edge of St. Pierre Vaast Wood. A decision had to be taken. G.H.Q. orders had laid on the Third Army the duty of keeping touch with the Fifth ; General Tudor therefore ordered the 26th Brigade, whether relieved by V. Corps troops or not, to move to the right at 4 A.M. on the 24th, and take up a position in front of Saillisel, in touch with the 27th Brigade.

This move would have the effect of still further widening the gap between the VII. and the V. Corps. On his return, therefore, to 9th Division headquarters at 11.30 P.M., Br.-General Tudor reported his action by telephone direct to Fifth Army, VII. Corps headquarters being on the move. He pointed out that unless the Third Army extended the V. Corps to the boundary laid down, there would be a large gap between the two Armies. General Byng being informed of this fact issued orders for the V. Corps to take up a line to join with the VII. Corps at Government Farm, which was practically on the boundary between the two.

At 4 A.M. on the 24th, the 26th Brigade, in accordance with its orders, left its position about Government Farm—Four Winds Farm and moved to the right. Owing apparently to a mistaken report that the 27th Brigade had fallen back from the eastern edge of St. Pierre Vaast Wood, the 26th Brigade did not join up with the left flank of the 27th, but took position further back in the ground between this wood and Sailly Saillisel, with its left battalion on the front edge of the village. Touch had not been gained with the V. Corps on the left by dawn on the 24th, since the right of the 47th Division front was nearly two miles away to the north-east. Its troops likewise had no knowledge of the whereabouts of the 9th Division, except that it was somewhere to the south-west.

At dawn on the 24th, therefore, the VII. Corps was

connected on the right with the XIX. Corps troops at Biaches opposite Péronne, but quite out of contact with the V. Corps on the left; its own front was broken into four parts, the right and the left centre being well in advance of the right centre and the left.

The field artillery covering the 39th Division (82 guns) was in position near Herbécourt; it had lost 16 guns on the 23rd. The 21st Divn artillery (48 guns) was in action between Hem and Maurepas; it had lost 11 guns during the day. The artillery of the 9th Division (88 guns) was in the Combles—Morval area. As already mentioned, a large proportion of the heavy artillery of the VII. Corps had been sent back to cover the Maricourt line some miles behind. Of the remainder, four guns had to be abandoned owing to the breakdown of transport. The 48 heavy guns still covering the corps front were in the Cury—Maurepas area.

As a reinforcement, at 6.30 P.M. on the 23rd the 35th Division was placed at the disposal of the VII. Corps. This division had been brought down from the Second Army front in Belgium, and detrained on the evening of the 23rd at Corbie, Heilly, and Méricourt l'Abbé, to the south-west of Albert. The 1st Cavalry Division also was transferred, as already noted, from the XIX. to the VII. Corps, and at 6 A.M. on the 24th it left Curchy, near Nesle, for Cappy, eight miles west of Péronne, behind the right of the VII. Corps, where the 16th Divn (less artillery) was in corps reserve.

**Maps 8,  
9.  
Sketch  
17.** The situation of the Fifth Army at dawn on the 24th may be summarized as follows.

During the previous 24 hours the line had everywhere gone back an average distance of four to six miles, with the exception of the left of the XVIII. Corps, which was not attacked until 2 p.m., when the fog had long disappeared, and so was able to maintain itself on the Somme. The centre, comprising the left of the XVIII. Corps above mentioned, and the whole of the XIX. Corps, which had evacuated the right of the Péronne bridgehead, was in position behind the Somme from Ham (exclusive) to Biaches, opposite Péronne, and had not yet been seriously attacked in this position. The number of troops available, however, was hardly sufficient to hold this river line of 18 miles in length. The right of the Army (the III. Corps and the right of the XVIII. Corps) had been driven

from its position on the Crozat canal and along the Somme as far west as and including Ham. The III. Corps had been almost entirely relieved by French troops, and the position held by the latter from Viry Noureuil, on the Oise, through Villequier Aumont and La Neuville to Cugny—which village was in the enemy's possession—might, if not turned from the north, be expected to hold. The right of the XVIII. Corps in a sharp salient north of Cugny, with the enemy behind it in Brouchy and Golancourt, had, on the contrary, little prospect of being able to remain there for long, and any retirement of its troops must necessarily render the situation of the French on the III. Corps front very precarious. The left of the Army, the VII. Corps, also held the Somme line for a short distance; but from Cléry northwards its front was disjointed, with considerable distances between the echelons of which it was composed; and its left was not in touch with the right of the Third Army, whose nearest troops were at least three thousand yards further north.

The position of the Fifth Army, therefore, was far from secure. Although the centre along the river might hold, it was not probable, with so little prospect of assistance, that either flank would do so. On the right, however, three more French divisions were due to arrive in the XVIII. Corps area on the 24th, and on the left, the 35th Division, sent from Belgium, had detrained behind the VII. Corps front on the evening of the 23rd, while the 1st Cavalry Division had been ordered to the same area.

General Gough, from his new headquarters at Villers Bretonneux—which, having previously been used as a command centre, possessed good signal communications—had been in telephonic communication with G.H.Q. and his corps commanders throughout the day.<sup>1</sup> He had kept G.H.Q. well informed of the main events and was able to put the whole situation before Sir Douglas Haig, when the Commander-in-Chief visited him early in the afternoon, including the item that the Fifth Army Intelligence Section had already identified 45 German divisions on the Fifth Army front. In the Fifth Army periodic report rendered to G.H.Q. at 2.30 p.m., it was stated that the XVIII. Corps was south of the Somme from Eaucourt

<sup>1</sup> III. Corps headquarters moved from Buchoire to Noyon at 5 P.M.; XVIII. from Nesle to Roye at 9.30 A.M.; XIX. from Villers Carbonnel to Foucaucourt (6 miles nearer Amiens) at 6 A.M., and the VII. from Cléry to Maricourt at 10 A.M.

to a point (named by co-ordinates) near Canizy, and Ham therefore had been lost. The final report for the day, giving the front line, sent at 8.30 P.M.—that is before Cugny was lost—was, in the circumstances, singularly accurate. It ran :—

“ III. Corps : S. of Oise no change. N. of river approx. :  
 “ Viry Noureuil—E. of Villequier Aumont—Cugny. XVIII.  
 “ Corps :—Cugny—Eaucourt—Brouchy [lost at 4.30 P.M.]  
 “ —Golancourt—Vilette—Verlaines—Eppeville, then along  
 “ Somme defences to junction with XIX. Corps, whose  
 “ line along the Somme unchanged ;  
 “ VII. Corps approx. : W. of Péronne, E. of Cléry, E. of  
 “ Bouchavesnes—Government Fm.”

At 12.20 P.M. G.H.Q. had issued an order<sup>1</sup> to the Fifth and Third Armies directing that a line of defence should at once be prepared following generally the old French-British front prior to the battle of the Somme of 1916. It was defined as : Line of the river Somme to Péronne—Albert—Gommecourt—Blairville—Beaurains—Arras, with a switch from Bray on the Somme to Albert.

Later, at 5 P.M., G.H.Q. telephoned an order<sup>2</sup> :—

“ Fifth Army will hold the line of the Somme river at “ all costs. There will be no withdrawal from this line.  
 “ . . . The Third and Fifth Armies must keep in closest “ touch . . . and must mutually assist each other in “ maintaining Péronne as a pivot.”

No assistance to secure these objectives, except the 35th Division already on its way towards the left of the Fifth Army, was mentioned, and at the very time that the order was despatched the line of the Somme had been lost ; the right of the Péronne bridgehead was being evacuated ; the last troops were struggling through the streets of the town ; and the junction between the two Armies had been broken. A definite order from G.H.Q. to the Third Army to bring back the V. Corps at once to the “ Red Line ” between Sailly Saillisel and Bapaume, from the salient which its front was still presenting to the enemy, might have averted the danger at the junction of the two Armies ; an order from General Fayolle to General Humbert to send some of the reinforcements, which were reaching him, northward against the flank of the Germans who had crossed the Somme near Ham, might have relieved the pressure there and saved the line of the Somme. Neither order

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 25.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 26.

was given, nor do any such movements appear to have been suggested.<sup>1</sup>

On receipt of the G.H.Q. order of 5 P.M., General Gough, at 5.45 P.M., repeated its substance to his corps commanders, and ordered the XVIII. and XIX. Corps to hold their present positions, and the VII. Corps to hold the line Biaches—(near) Government Farm; which it did. The III. Corps was informed that it would be henceforward under the orders of the French Third Army.

The Germans might now have been stopped, as their infantry was receiving little support from the artillery, which it had outpaced, if substantial reinforcements had been available, or even if the troops had been less tired and the divisional staffs trained in open warfare. These conditions, however, did not exist. By this stage eight out of the eleven divisions of the Fifth Army originally in the front line, and three brigades of the remaining divisions had suffered such heavy losses that they were only "remnants" of their former selves. Most of the divisional troops, engineers, pioneers and details, besides dismounted cavalry, tunnellers, gas units, entrenching battalions (made up of men available as reinforcements), schools and depots, in fact, any man who could use a rifle, had been thrown into the fight. The vast majority of the troops had been in action without rest or, owing to night retirements, ordinary sleep for three days, and were feeling the strain. Food they had obtained, but they were suffering from want of water. The one division (50th) in Army reserve, and the two divisions (20th and 39th) in G.H.Q. reserve originally behind the Fifth Army had been employed, and the first was already badly battered; parts of two French divisions

<sup>1</sup> Actually the orders issued at 4 P.M. by General Fayolle (from G.A.R. headquarters at Verberie, 30 miles south-west of Noyon) to General Humbert (who was directed to make Montdidier the headquarters for the Third Army), began: "Mission of the Third Army: It is essential to seek liaison "with the British in the region Offoy—Nesle. In consequence, the 10th "Division [just beginning to arrive at Flavy le Meldeux, after 15 hours in "lorries and a 20-mile march, without artillery and with only 80 rounds "per man] will try to deploy opposite to Esmery Hallon, between the "Noyon—Ham road and the Canal du Nord; the 62nd Division [detrain—" ing 5 miles west of Noyon] between that canal and the Somme, seeking "liaison with the British.

"The 22nd Division [just beginning to detrain immediately east of Roye] will be assembled in reserve in the region Champien—Ognolles—Solente—Balâtre [these villages are east of Roye].

"The 1st Cavalry Division will be brought from the right to the left in "the region south of Nesle.

"The 10th Division will retake Golancourt and Esmery Hallon."

"The 62nd Division will arrange to occupy Hombleux."

and a dismounted French cavalry division were in the course of relieving what remained of the 18th and 14th Divns ; but as they were without guns—except in the case of the 125th Division—or reserve ammunition, it did not appear likely that they would arrest the enemy's progress ; and the 8th Division, from the First Army area, had arrived just too late to stop him coming on.

Trained in and accustomed to trench warfare, little practised in open fighting and entirely unpractised in the conduct of a retreat, units and formations were inclined to leave a position directly one of its flanks was turned ; the opportunities of dealing with parties of the enemy who advanced into pockets were practically neglected. Without the usual telegraphic and telephonic communication with their brigades, which the signal sections, even had they possessed the material, could neither lay nor maintain at the speed of this new form of warfare ; with the congestion of the roads preventing the use of cars, and the shell-pitted and broken surface of the devastated area slowing down the pace of horses, divisional staffs were unable to keep in constant touch with the front. Even communication between corps and divisions was irregular and belated. Orders to hold positions to the last might be sent, but even if they reached their destination, it was often too late or impossible to carry them out. What might have been a series of rear-guard actions became a mere retirement from one line to another. The control of the infantry operations with such communications as they could improvise lay mainly in the hands of the infantry brigadiers, often in the dark as to the intentions of the higher commands, and, considering the tremendous difficulties they had to face, they acquitted themselves of their task in a manner deserving of the highest praise. The artillery did its best to help, the batteries keeping in touch with the nearest infantry units by means of mounted men.

If reinforcements could not be sent, then respite from pursuit for several days was required for reorganization of units and commands, and for the construction of field positions. This respite was not to be obtained.

## CHAPTER XIV

THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

23RD MARCH 1918 (*concluded*)

### THIRD ARMY

(Maps 6, 7 ; Sketches 6, 16)

DURING the afternoon of the 22nd the centre of the Third Army had been driven back for a distance of about two miles, and its right and left wings had been withdrawn to conform with this movement. General Byng's main cause for anxiety on the 23rd was, however, the situation on his right flank. The centre corps, the IV. and VI., had inflicted such heavy casualties on the enemy that he might well be expected to relax his efforts against them —an anticipation not to be fulfilled in the case of the IV. Corps. On the right the V. Corps line still formed a definite salient between those of its neighbours, the VII. Corps (Fifth Army) and the IV. Corps, for both of these had been forced back.

Map 7.  
Sketch 16.

The pressure against the front of the V. Corps line had not been great; but the jaws of the pincers on either flank were beginning to close unpleasantly, narrowing the gap through which the retirement of the corps would have to be made. There was obviously no time to be lost in extricating it from the salient where it had been left too long in the vain hope that, after all, it might not prove necessary to abandon ground so hardly won.

### V. Corps

The order issued by G.H.Q. at 11.30 P.M. on the 22nd for the withdrawal to the Green Line had, we have seen, reached the Third Army at 12.45 A.M. on the 23rd, and the various corps about 1.30 A.M. But it was not until between

3 A.M. and 4 A.M. that divisions in the V. Corps area received the warning order, accompanied by an enquiry as to when the movement could be started. To ensure that the executive order should reach the rear-guard units in time—communication in advance of divisional headquarters was precarious, being mainly by messenger—10 A.M. was generally suggested as a suitable hour for the retirement of the main bodies to commence. Allowing time for these bodies to get clear, this meant that the rear guards would have to remain on the position until 1 P.M.

The latter hour was accordingly fixed and about 9.30 A.M. orders reached battalions that the rear guards should leave the sector Equancourt—Metz—Havrincourt Wood—Hermies at 1 P.M.; units on the left of this line, being in a sector echeloned back and having less distance to retire, would move off at 3 P.M. The Green Line was to be held from right to left by the 47th, 63rd and 2nd Divisions, while the 17th, which at present held the left, was to go into reserve behind the southern sector of the Red Line, two miles in rear, ready if necessary to spread out on that line, which was not yet dug. The 47th Division (which had the 99th Bde of the 2nd Division with it) was also to hold the crossings of the Tortille on the right rear of the corps, north of Etricourt. Shortly after 9.30 A.M. Lieut-General Fanshawe heard from the Third Army that instructions had been sent to the VII. Corps (Fifth Army) on his right, for its left (9th Division) to keep touch with his corps and not to withdraw from Nurlu and northward until such time as his corps was ready to retire. Only the latter part of this information was correct, for the G.H.Q. order for the Third Army to keep touch with the Fifth had not been changed or modified: the origin of this misunderstanding cannot now be traced. In any case, events in the south made it necessary to order the withdrawal of the divisions of the VII. Corps and heavy attacks prevented the rear guards of its 9th Division from maintaining their position on the Nurlu line as intended.

Until 1 P.M., the hour of the withdrawal of the V. Corps rear guards, the Germans, although they closed up, made no serious attack against the 63rd or 17th Division. Away to the left, against the IV. Corps, they could be seen moving in force, though fortunately not making appreciable progress. But they were also advancing against the right wing of the V. Corps, and drove a wedge into the front of

the 47th Division near the cemetery which lies a mile to the south-east of Metz. Although they made no immediate attempt to exploit this success, later in the day, whilst anxiety for the left flank was decreasing, the danger on the right flank as the gap between the Fifth and Third Armies widened became serious indeed.

The 47th Division (Major-General Sir G. F. Gorringe) was disposed with the 140th and 142nd Brigades in the Dessart Ridge and Metz Switches to about the southern edge of Havrincourt Wood (immediately north of Metz), thus forming a long defensive flank; the divisional engineers and the 141st Brigade were in support in the rear line of the Battle Zone, ready to cover the withdrawal of the two forward brigades. About 9 A.M. both the 141st Brigade and the enemy appear to have discovered that a considerable gap had grown in the line between the right of the 47th Division and the left of the 99th Bde, which with its battalions now only 350 strong was trying to maintain the connection between the Fifth and Third Armies. The opportunity to attack the flank of the 47th Division was of course irresistible to the local German troops. Without making a frontal attack, they pressed in from the south and south-east against the flank and rear of the 140th Brigade. The machine guns of the brigade, which fired over 25,000 rounds, and the 141st Brigade, echeloned in rear, made desperate efforts to arrest the enemy's northward progress, and after heavy and close fighting were successful in checking him. He, however, maintained his grip on part of the switch near the Army boundary. He then tried to make a breach a little further to the north at the junction of the 140th and 142nd Brigades, and managed to secure a piece of trench left unoccupied through a mistake in carrying out reliefs. But the 47th Division, with intensive machine-gun and rifle fire, splendidly supported by its artillery, otherwise maintained its position intact. After the repulse of further attempts made at 10.45 and 11.15 A.M., the German attacks died down without further serious effort to exploit the gaps in the 47th Division front.<sup>1</sup>

Meantime, the retirement of the rearward echelons of

<sup>1</sup> Apparently the attacks were only made to hold the V. Corps whilst the "pioneers" took effect. Goes does not mention the attacks on the 47th Division, stating, p. 100, that the *21st Reserve* and *16th Reserve Divisions* "not equipped for war of movement . . . met resistance in the wood "south of Havrincourt (it extends from Metz to Havrincourt), which "developed into counter-attacks. . . . At night the *16th Reserve Division* "was withdrawn from the offensive".

the 47th Division had begun, according to plan, at 10 A.M., the fog having already cleared off. At 1 P.M. the rear guards of the 140th and 142nd Brigades slipped off under cover of a short barrage fired to cover the start. They suffered some casualties from desultory heavy artillery fire, also from machine-gun and rifle fire from the right flank, and were followed up fairly closely until the pursuers came under fire of the 141st Brigade, when they stopped and showed no inclination to give further trouble. The withdrawal was then carried out without incident; but about 3 P.M., when the 47th Division had assembled on the Green Line, the Germans, who were following up the 99th Bde,<sup>1</sup> which about 11 A.M. had been withdrawn under heavy fire from its position near Equancourt, had reached that village and were moving northwards behind the Green Line. The direction of their attack, designed to cut off the V. Corps, had the effect of driving the 47th Division off its assigned line of retirement, which was westwards, and forcing it north-westwards, thus widening the gap between the Fifth and Third Armies.

To check the enemy's further progress, Major-General Gorringe ordered a defensive flank to be formed facing south. Earlier, at 2.30 P.M., a party of about a hundred men, mostly headquarter details and stragglers of the 140th Brigade, had been collected at Four Winds Farm, situated on the higher ground about three thousand yards north-west of Equancourt. On this party, which was lying out on the bare ground in extended order, the remainder of the 140th Brigade fell back, and its line was soon prolonged on either flank by the 99th Bde, which had retired north-westwards away from the VII. Corps, to which it was attached. To the left the 142nd Brigade continued this line in Vallular Wood, between the left half of the 99th Bde and the 63rd Division. The enemy, now supported by trench mortars and low-flying aeroplanes, attempted to continue his advance across the ground just south of Four Winds Farm; driven back by rifle fire alone, about 5 P.M. he settled down a thousand yards away. The 141st Brigade and the three engineer companies, which had covered the retirement on the east side of the wood, and had only

<sup>1</sup> It will be recalled that the 99th Bde had been separated into two parts, two companies of the 1/R. Berkshire being near the 9th Division at the sugar factory north of Etricourt, and the rest near Equancourt, with a wide gap between the two parts. Here the 99th Bde means the main portion.

been followed by scouts, were then brought back and sent into divisional reserve. All these movements of the 47th Division were completed by 6 P.M., at which hour the gap between the Fifth and Third Armies had widened to no less than three miles.

The 63rd and 17th Divisions, although some of their units were in danger of being cut off, managed to get clear and reach the Green Line. By 4 P.M. the main body of the 63rd, which had moved across country in artillery formation without a casualty in spite of the enemy's gunfire, was established on the Green Line in touch on the right with the 47th Division and on the left with the 2nd Divn. This latter division had up till then been in reserve, although its artillery had remained working with the 47th Division, which had preceded the other divisions to the Green Line. Only the rearguard of the 190th Brigade retiring from in front of Havrincourt, where the enemy had been in close contact since early morning, was somewhat harassed by scouts, who became unpleasantly active about 12.30 P.M.

The right (52nd Brigade) of the 17th Division was equally lucky; but the 50th and 51st Brigades in and around Hermies, where the line broke back and formed an angle, were involved in serious difficulties before they could get away. About 1 P.M., advanced parties of Germans, having forced their way into the IV. Corps area to the west, had entered Vélu Wood to the left rear of the 17th Division,<sup>1</sup> where they also menaced the 63rd Division, which was just settling into the Bertincourt salient of the Green Line. In its retirement part of the divisional artillery had only a short time previously followed a route quite close to the edge of the wood, which was also the left boundary of the line of retreat of the 51st Brigade. At 1 P.M., too, at the very moment of the withdrawal of the rear guards, the German *4th Division* made a desperate attack on Hermies, which had resisted all previous efforts;<sup>2</sup> it was spurred on in this attempt by the report that there was little hope of the British being able to get away from the village in daylight.

<sup>1</sup> See pages 383-4.

<sup>2</sup> Goes, p. 99, represents the evacuation of Hermies as a great triumph for German arms:

"Every Englishman held it as unassailable. The *4th (West Pommeranian) Division* [fresh from second line] was to prove the contrary. Light and heavy shells of *Field Art. Regt. 53* and *Foot Art. Battns. 48* and *153* thunder out the overture to the assault of *Regiments Mülmann* and *Nolda*, which enveloped the village on either side."

Attacking first the front of the 51st Brigade in the re-entrant west of the village, they almost cut off the 7/Lincolnshire, holding it. The battalion lost practically half its small strength (Lieut.-Colonel F. E. Metcalfe being wounded), before it could extricate itself. Although covered on the left by the 10/Sherwood Foresters, the Lincolnshire were forced southwards towards the Canal du Nord, whence, working westward, they eventually reached Bertincourt. The Foresters, as they got near Vélu Wood, were assailed by machine-gun fire from it, and were suffering severely when D/LXXIX. Battery R.F.A. saw their plight and, firing over open sights, prevented the Germans from debouching from the wood and silenced their machine guns. The battalion was able to continue its march unhindered.

The attempt of the Germans to envelop Hermies also afforded them an opportunity to attack the 6/Dorsetshire on the left of the 50th Brigade ; by swinging round to the left, they arrived within two hundred and fifty yards of the flank of the battalion, which only evaded complete envelopment by sharp fighting and eventually had to withdraw under heavy fire. The stout fighting of the troops in Hermies had greatly contributed to aid the withdrawal of other battalions.

The enemy now gave the 17th Division a chance of retaliation. Elated at the capture of Hermies, German columns advanced in close formation down the Hermies—Bertincourt road, providing excellent targets for the motor machine-gun battery and the divisional machine gunners, who made the most of the opportunity, and also dealt with bold parties of Germans moving about in the vicinity of Vélu Wood. By evening, in spite of its adventures, the 17th Division was concentrated in its appointed place in reserve, near Rocquigny. The artillery had done much to assist the withdrawal ; its difficulty had been to cover the front without, in the obscurity of the situation, firing on its own infantry : often the batteries had had to wait until the last of the infantry was nearly abreast of the guns before feeling certain where the line was. The question of ammunition had also caused anxiety all day, as, owing to confusion on the lines of communication, the dumps at Ytres were empty of field gun ammunition.

At 3.25 p.m. Lieut.-General Fanshawe, anxious for his right flank and for the maintenance of touch with the Fifth

Army, had ordered the 47th Division to take over the line, as far south as the Army boundary near Manancourt, from any troops of the 9th Division (VII. Corps) and of the 99th Bde which were in the Third Army area. The division was at the same time to draw back its left to join the Green Line near the divisional boundary at Vallular Wood. The effect of this order, if indeed the 47th Division had been able to cover a front of three miles, would have been to obliterate the salient of Equancourt. But the order came too late, and obedience to it was put out of the question by the northward retirement of the 47th Division, which thus ended the day three miles north of the Army boundary. At 5.30 P.M., by arrangement between Generals Gough and Byng, an order was issued for the transfer of the 99th Bde from the 9th to the 47th Division, with which it was already co-operating.

The optimistic retention and over-garrisoning of the Flesquières Salient was being paid for in more ways than one. It will be recalled that the 47th Division should have been maintained in reserve for the express purpose of securing the junction between the two Armies, but it had been used instead to relieve the 2nd Divn, on account of the latter having suffered so heavily from gas in the Salient.

At 7.20 P.M. the Third Army issued an operation order, in compliance with the G.H.Q. orders of 5 P.M. General Byng, who had meantime been visited by General Gough, fixed Government Farm, just south-west of Manancourt as the point on the Army boundary where junction was to be made with the troops of the Fifth Army. The order continued : "at which point V. Corps will maintain touch "with them. . . . V. Corps will establish the best line "possible from Government Farm to join our present "Green Line at most suitable spot. . . . V. Corps should "arrange to keep a reserve in echelon behind his right to "secure situation at point of junction".

These orders Lieut.-General Fanshawe passed on to his divisions at 9.20 P.M., making the 47th Division responsible for maintaining touch with the Fifth Army and for holding the right flank. At the same time he ordered the 99th Bde to be returned to the 2nd Divn, and so rendered it quite impossible for Major-General Gorringe to maintain touch. The 17th Division was to be prepared to move at short notice to support the 47th Division, while the 68rd Division was to extend its right. Had the situation at Vélu Wood been other than it actually was, Lieut.-General Fanshawe

would have used the 17th to counter-attack. No one either at V. Corps or Third Army headquarters seems to have gathered from the Fifth Army's reports or G.H.Q. orders the full scale of the German attack and the necessity of an ordered and instant retreat.

The G.O.C. 47th Divn, being well up with his troops—the whole of his infantry now amounted to less than a brigade—and the V. Corps headquarters being at Méaulte (just south of Albert), 11 miles away, it was not until 2.10 A.M. on the 24th that the corps orders reached the 47th Divn. Meantime Major-General Gorringe had vainly tried to obtain instructions on a frequently interrupted telephone line, at the other end of which there was no one who knew where his troops were. In the interval, further trouble had befallen the 47th Divn, which affected the whole V. Corps.

After 5 P.M. the enemy had remained quiet and watchful on the east front of the Flesquières Salient, but eventually he made another attempt to exploit the gap between the Fifth and Third Armies; the aim now was to cut off and capture the V. Corps by driving in the refused right flank of the 47th Divn. Towards 7.30 P.M., under a heavy barrage the *54th Reserve Division* attacked the 140th Bde and the men of the 99th Bde on its right, at Four Winds Farm, and drove them westwards.<sup>1</sup> The Germans, pushing forward towards Bus, swept up on the way the advanced headquarters of the 1/23rd London in Lechelle. They entered Bus, defended by the Hawke Battalion (63rd Division), which was in reserve, and by a mixed party of infantrymen and the machine gunners of the 2nd and 47th Divns; but they were unable to debouch from it.

On the higher ground beyond the village were established the headquarters of the 24/R. Fusiliers (2nd Divn), with the Hawke Battalion and other troops from Bus, and the rear echelon of the 2nd Divn machine guns. These troops immediately formed a firing line and, being favoured by the light of burning ammunition dumps and the Expeditionary Force Canteen, which had been fired to prevent the Germans capturing its supplies, they were able to shoot with some accuracy; in fact they held up the

<sup>1</sup> The *54th Reserve Division*, a second line formation, about 3 P.M. received orders to relieve the *27th Division* in the front line, and at 6 P.M. another order to pass through the *27th Division* and "this evening take Bus and the heights west and north-west of it. These hills are to be held." "Res. Regt. No. 248."

Germans who had advanced singing and shouting, after a short halt at Ytres where they had found a stock of whisky. Other units came up in the course of the next two hours to strengthen the line : the two reserve companies of the 24/R. Fusiliers, the Drake Battalion (63rd Division), the 1/K.R.R.C. (99th Bde), which had been on the left of the breach made by the Germans, and the men of a field battery who had taken up rifles when their gun ammunition had run out. Lastly, two field companies of the 2nd Divn and the pioneers of the 47th near Barastre were made available as reserve.

Thus, although the Germans were in Bus, they were unable to push beyond it during the night. Pressure at that point, however, was to occasion the retirement of the whole line of the 47th Divn. The 142nd Bde, next to the 140th in Vallulart Wood and facing south, found that its right was turned and its westward retreat blocked by the German advance on Lechelle, so began to retire via Ytres on Bus towards 10 P.M. The leading battalion on leaving Ytres, which had been found unoccupied, suddenly encountered heavy machine-gun fire, and in order to avoid Bus, the whole brigade then made a circuitous march across country by compass bearings, northwards to Bertincourt, thence south-westwards to Barastre and southwards again to Rocquigny, which was reached early on the 24th. Thus the 47th Divn was reassembled ; for to this last-named place the 141st Bde from the support line and the remnant of the 140th Bde had earlier been ordered to retire and there they had occupied the Red Line, facing east. The 17th Division was in reserve to the north-west.

The retirement of the 47th Divn from the Green Line left a gap on the right of the 63rd, with only two companies in reserve available to fill it and keep touch. The situation gradually grew worse, and to meet it Major-General Lawrie used his 190th Brigade to form a defensive flank facing south towards Ytres. This line was continued westward, with gaps, by that held by the medley of troops north of Bus, which covered the R.A. and R.E. dumps situated north of Ytres. But this did not save the dumps ; in the course of the night they were fired by enemy shells. The rest of the 63rd Division and the 2nd Divn (less the 99th Bde still with the 47th Divn) remained on their positions along the Green Line, which they had reached at 6 P.M.

The situation of the 63rd Division was not a happy

one : its infantry on the Green Line and north of Ytres had the enemy behind it at Bus, while its artillery, astride the Bus—Rocquigny road, was actually between the enemy in Bus and other Germans to the south of Rocquigny.

At 2.30 A.M. on the 24th, V. Corps headquarters—after the issue of various orders and counter-orders to the 17th Division, on hearing that parties of the enemy had penetrated the line near Bus—issued instructions for the divisions to reorganize and to secure their own protection until the situation could be cleared up and taken in hand. The 17th Division was directed by telephone to occupy the Red Line as a reserve with a line of posts which, at dawn, should extend from the south-east of Rocquigny to Barastre ; it was also to obtain touch with the 47th Divn, and this it did at Rocquigny about 6 A.M. At 5.37 A.M., having at last learnt the position of the 47th Divn, Lieut.-General Fanshawe ordered the 51st Brigade, the reserve of the 17th Division, to reinforce it and to fill the gap between Government Farm on the Army boundary and the right of the 47th Divn south of Rocquigny. The brigade marched very soon after, and by 8.30 A.M. was in touch with the 9th Division, the left of the VII. Corps. Thus contact, lost for nearly 24 hours, was once more established between the Fifth and Third Armies.

Even when this junction had been effected—actually between the front line of the VII. Corps and the second line of the V. Corps—the situation of the latter corps was still perilous. Its troops had been forced back by the pressure of the German attacks in a general north-westerly direction, until it was divided into two main parts, with gaps in the front of one of them. Whilst some of the 47th Divn and 17th Division had been withdrawn to the undug north-south position called the Red Line, the others, the 63rd Division and the 2nd Divn (less the 99th Bde) were still holding the Green Line around the Bertincourt salient facing east and north with a defensive flank facing south ; they were thus formed round three sides of a rough square of 3,000 yards base. In the southern flank there were two small gaps, and there was another large gap between this flank and the troops in the Red Line, that is, between Bus and Rocquigny.

Tired is not strong enough an expression to describe the state of the troops, most of whom were still suffering from gas shelling in the Flesquières Salient. There were a certain number of stragglers, but arrangements were

made divisionally to collect them at headquarters, and by bringing up supply wagons to feed them there; after food and sleep they were ready to face the enemy again. No words also could convey any picture of the confusion of the night of the 23rd/24th March: troops wandering about to find their brigades and battalions, in an area without landmarks, devastated a year before by the enemy; dumps burning and exploding; gaps in the line; the Germans attacking almost behind the V. Corps front; the atmosphere charged with uncertainty, and full of the wildest reports and rumours.

#### *IV. Corps*

By early morning of the 23rd, the IV. Corps had evacuated the Battle Zone except for a length of eighteen hundred yards of its rear trench at the south-eastern extremity of the front near the V. Corps. The ground between the Battle Zone and the Green Line was still held, and the latter line manned throughout its length. On receipt of the Third Army orders timed 12.45 A.M.<sup>1</sup> the corps had at once passed on to its divisions the information of the impending withdrawal of the V. Corps, and at 5.20 A.M., Lieut.-General Harper issued his orders. These stated that the retirement of the V. Corps would probably be resumed during the following night, and that the IV. Corps would conform to the movements. The 19th and 41st Divisions were to continue to hold the Green Line, while, covered by rear guards, all troops in front of this line were to be withdrawn behind it: the 51st Divn, on the right, suiting its pace to that of the 17th Division, the left of the V. Corps, was to fall back to the Bancourt area, about half-way between the Green Line and Bapaume and seven to eight thousand yards west of its present position, and there reorganize: during the withdrawal the brigades detached from their proper divisions were to return to them:<sup>2</sup> finally, when the divisions had reached their new positions, they were to be prepared to extend the corps front northwards three thousand five hundred yards so as to take over one divisional sector from the VI. Corps.

All arrangements were made to maintain the existing positions during daylight, and then, under cover of dark-

<sup>1</sup> See pages 371-2.

<sup>2</sup> The 57th and 74th Brigades, then with the 51st Divn, to revert to the 19th and 25th Divisions, respectively.

ness, to fall back to the Green Line. The course of events necessitated a change in this plan.

After receipt of the corps message giving warning of the probable further retirement of the V. Corps at nightfall, Major-General Carter-Campbell judged it advisable to make preparations for a withdrawal of the 51st Divn<sup>1</sup> by day, since the attitude of the enemy seemed to render it likely that both the V. and IV. Corps might be compelled to fall back earlier than their commanders intended. The Bapaume—Cambrai road where it passed through the left of the 51st Divn sector ran along a spur on either side of which were sheltered valleys, sufficient to conceal troops massing for attack. The heads of these valleys came to within five hundred yards of the British position. From the northern valley, at the head of which lay Chaufours Wood, the Germans did emerge at 5.30 A.M.; but they were driven back with severe loss by the 11/Lancashire Fusiliers (25th Division), aided by the seven machine guns which were holding the left of the 51st Divn front. The whole corps sector was then shelled, and at 7 A.M. the enemy tried the southern valley, at the head of which lies part of the village of Beaumetz, the remainder of it straggling up the southern slope. Three times did large enemy forces (of the 3rd Guard and 39th Divisions) essay to close with the 152nd Bde Group,<sup>2</sup> only to be driven back by the combined fire of artillery, rifles and Lewis and machine guns. But in the end the Germans gained a little ground in the northern valley, pushed up machine guns and enfiladed the line to the right and left. The 11/Lancashire Fusiliers then gradually fell back on the 1/4th K.S.L.I.<sup>3</sup> (19th Division) which was in support, and by 10 A.M. the enemy had reached the western edge of Lebucquière, which lay across the line of retreat of the 152nd Bde. A quarter of an hour later orders arrived from Major-General Carter-Campbell for a retirement through Vélu Wood, in the V. Corps area,

<sup>1</sup> The 153rd Bde, in reserve, reported its strength as 226.

<sup>2</sup> Consisting of the 1/5th and 1/6th Seaforth, parts of the 401st and 404th Field Companies R.E., and the 10/Worcestershire (57th Brigade). The 1/6th Gordon, the third battalion of the 152nd Bde, spent the night of the 22nd/23rd in Frémicourt; at noon on the 23rd it was ordered to take up a position at Mill Cross astride the road leading from Frémicourt to Lebucquière, immediately behind the front of the Green Line; at 4 p.m. it was placed under the 56th Brigade, 19th Division, and remained at Mill Cross till the 24th.

<sup>3</sup> Until July 1917, this battalion had been in India, Hong Kong and Singapore.

round the west side of Lebucquière. Although fighting took place on the way and the enemy was found to be occupying Vélu and Vélu Wood,<sup>1</sup> the 152nd Bde managed to carry out the order and so proceeded to its rendezvous at Bancourt.

The 11/Lancashire Fusiliers and the 1/4th K.S.L.I. held the support line to the north until about 11.30 A.M.; the enemy fire then grew so heavy, that they were compelled to retire to the Green Line.

Against the 154th Bde Group,<sup>2</sup> the Germans<sup>3</sup> did not attack until 9.30 A.M., when the battle gradually spread south-westwards. Here also about 10.30 A.M. the enemy broke in on the left from Beaumetz, after a prolonged fire-fight; then, getting behind the 8/Gloucestershire, which was in a salient, he forced that battalion and the 10/R. Warwickshire behind it to retire first on the Vélu—Lebucquière railway, and then to form a defensive left flank facing the northern side of Vélu Wood.<sup>4</sup>

About 1 P.M. the Germans could be seen pouring into Vélu Wood, and half an hour later they appeared on high ground threatening the right of the defensive flank; but heavy casualties were inflicted on them here. After the advance had been delayed for more than half an hour, however, the defenders were overwhelmed.<sup>5</sup> Unaware of the orders to retire, the remainder of the two battalions went on fighting, repulsing all attempts of the Germans to emerge from Vélu and Vélu Wood; then at 2.50 P.M., hearing at last from a battalion of the 2nd Divn near

<sup>1</sup> See page 375.

<sup>2</sup> Consisting of the 1/4th Seaforth and 1/7th Argyll, with the 10/Warwickshire and 8/Gloucestershire (of the 57th Bde). The 1/4th Gordon, the third battalion of the brigade, was in reserve south-west of Lebucquière, and did not take part in the day's fighting. It went later in the day to the south-west of Bancourt, where it was joined early on 24th by the other battalions.

<sup>3</sup> 3rd Guard Division, reinforced later by the 24th Division from second line.

<sup>4</sup> The retirement was most ably covered by Captain M. A. James, M.C., 8/Gloucestershire with his company. For his gallantry on this and previous occasions during the German offensive he was awarded the V.C.

A fine defence of some artillery was made about noon by a party of the 8/Gloucestershire and 10/Warwickshire, amounting in all to about a hundred men. Under the command of R.-S.-M. Hopcroft, of the former battalion, this party took up a line along the south of Vélu Wood, and enabled all the guns of the 104th Army Brigade R.F.A. to be withdrawn, although the Germans were within 500 yards of them.

<sup>5</sup> The defence was made by a company of the 10/Warwickshire, under Captain J. R. Gribble. When last seen, it was surrounded at a few yards' distance by the Germans. Captain Gribble (who died of pneumonia in captivity at the end of the year) was awarded the V.C.

Bertincourt that the Green Line was to become the front line, at 3 P.M. the survivors of the 10/R. Warwickshire and 8/Gloucestershire fell back in good order and rejoined their brigade, reaching Bancourt about 7 P.M.

The two battalions (1/4th Seaforth and 1/7th Argyll) on the right of the 154th Bde, still partly in rear trenches of the Battle Zone, and partly in the defensive left flank next to the 10/R. Warwickshire, held on until 3.30 P.M., although the 17th Division (V. Corps) had retired from Hermies about 1 P.M. The Highlanders were isolated, and bombed from the evacuated trenches on the west without the means to reply. Still resisting they were enfiladed by machine-gun fire from the east, fired on by infantry, which advanced under a smoke screen formed by firing the grass, and shelled by field guns brought into action at close range from the north-east between Beaumetz and Doignies. Eventually therefore the Argylls and Seaforths fell back on the Hermies—Vélu railway line, and then, behind the Germans in Vélu Wood, southwards on the Green Line covering Bertincourt, where the left of the V. Corps was already established. Not until the early hours of the 24th did the two battalions rejoin the 51st Divn just west of Villers au Flos, thus completing the re-assembly of that division in reserve behind the 19th and 41st Divisions, which were now holding the Green Line on the IV. Corps front.

Next to the 51st Divn, north of the Bapaume—Cambrai road, the front line formed a salient, first running north for fifteen hundred yards, and then due west for another two thousand yards. This sector was held by two battalions each of the 58th and 123rd Brigades; the two remaining battalions covered Beugny, while one from the 25th Division was in support. Beyond this point the line came to an abrupt end and dropped back, being continued in the Green Line fifteen hundred yards in rear. Touch between the two portions of the front had been maintained by patrols during the previous afternoon; but endeavours to keep this up during the night had failed, and in the morning owing to the fog contact had not been re-established. About 7 A.M. shelling of the right of the line began, but German infantry attacks made about 8 A.M. broke down. An hour later the orders were received for the retirement to begin after nightfall at 9.30 P.M., preparations were made to carry them out, and for another two hours nothing of importance happened.

The enemy occupation at 10 A.M. of Lebucquière, to the right rear of the sector, did not become known until 2 P.M.; but at 11 A.M. the Germans began to press in on the 58th and 123rd Brigades. The movement was not only against the front and the open left flank, but also from the right rear, for some of the enemy who had broken in near Lebucquière had proceeded to spread out westwards.<sup>1</sup> The two battalions on the left were at once ordered to fall back on Beugny, whilst on the right the support battalion formed a defensive flank. Soon afterwards, German infantry attacked under a barrage and a violent fight ensued along the whole front.

So threatening did the enemy concentration appear that the squadrons of the R.F.C. were called on to extend their low-flying attacks both towards Beugny and northward of the village. Then about 2 P.M. orders for a retirement were received from the 41st Division at both brigade headquarters. To repeat them to the battalions and then make them known to the companies was another matter. Runners were dispatched to the advanced battalions of the 58th Brigade, but, as the men had to descend a gentle slope under fire very few succeeded in getting through. Until 3 P.M. the front line held its position; then German attacks on all sides gradually overwhelmed the 6/Wiltshire, 9/R. Welch Fusiliers, 11/Queen's and 10/R. West Kent, and the 9/Welch which was hanging on to Beugny in order to assist survivors of the other units to get away. In the end only remnants of the five battalions escaped.<sup>2</sup>

The left sector of the IV. Corps, the front of which was the Green Line from south of the Bapaume—Cambrai road to about 2,500 yards short of Mory, was held by the 56th Brigade (19th Division), the 7th Brigade (25th Division) and the 124th Brigade (41st Division). It was well sited, mostly on a reverse slope, and a good deal of work had been done on it in the night. As a result, it was maintained intact, in spite of six violent attacks during the day, the last by dismounted cavalry. Some half a million rounds of ammunition were poured into the enemy by the 10/Queen's and 20/Durham L.I., on the left, alone, all the

<sup>1</sup> The convergent attack on Beugny was made by three divisions, 20th, 195th and 39th, the last from the second line, with the 16th Bavarian behind it. Beugny was stormed by the whole division Trautmann (20th). *Goes, pp. 97-8.*

<sup>2</sup> The 10/R. West Kent collected 8 officers and 55 other ranks, increased by a few stragglers to 65 all told.

officers taking up rifles ; whilst a field battery galloped up and fired over open sights when the attackers were only two hundred yards off. In the first three attacks the Germans several times came to within twenty or thirty yards of the line, and their dead were piled in heaps on the wire in front of the Green Line. The anxiety therefore was not for the front, but for the high ground on the left on either side of the Mory valley, which runs approximately north and south, with a branch towards Gomiegourt. Any advance southwards from this quarter would have brought the enemy behind the Green Line, and a defensive flank was therefore formed on the left, where the IV. Corps cyclists were sent to ensure that touch should be kept with the VI. Corps and early information received of events in the Mory quarter. But the enemy made no progress there,<sup>1</sup> although, by shelling and machine-gun fire from low-flying aeroplanes, he made the day of the 23rd and the following night fairly uncomfortable for the troops around Mory.

For the fighting during the 23rd the field artillery of the IV. Corps had been divided into two groups, placed under the C.R.A.'s of the 51st Divn and the 6th Divn respectively, with the XXIX. and XL. Heavy Brigades (of 60-pdrs and 6-inch howitzers) attached. These groups should have covered the whole corps front, but actually the field artillery brigades (the artillery of the 6th Divn now formed no more than a composite brigade) fought in conjunction with the different infantry brigades. Of the rest of the heavy artillery, which remained under corps orders, all caterpillar-drawn guns and howitzers (6-inch guns and over, and 8-inch howitzers and over) were sent back, whilst the remaining batteries were placed near the Bapaume—Albert and Bapaume—Achiet le Grand roads. In spite of the ill-defined position of the foremost troops on the right, the guns did good service, being greatly assisted by the flares and lights shown by the infantry to mark their positions. The targets during the day, after the fog cleared, consisted for the most part of troops in the open ; occasionally a German battery was caught going into action in the open, and suffered accordingly. When, about midday, the enemy gained possession of Lebucquière and Vélu Wood, the batteries supporting the right of the corps were withdrawn behind the Green Line for its defence.

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 97, claims no success north of Beugny.

Only one battery of the 293rd Army Brigade near Vélu Wood had to be abandoned after expending all its ammunition, and only three guns in all appear to have been hit.<sup>1</sup>

A considerable amount of work was done during the day, not only on the Red Line (the projected rear line of the projected Rear Zone), as ordered by the IV. Corps, but also on the Green Line. This was strengthened. Also, a position between the lines, covering Sapignies and Béhagnies to protect the left flank, which had been the source of so much anxiety, was dug by the field companies of the 25th Division, two battalions of the 75th Brigade and reinforcements. All available field companies, pioneer battalions and tunnellers were employed, as well as working parties of the 6th Divn (in reserve); but, according to the records, only one hundred men of the Labour Corps.

On hearing at 12.15 P.M. of the retirement of the V. Corps, Lieut.-General Harper thought it necessary to make a slight alteration in his 5.20 A.M. orders : the 19th and 41st Divisions were still to hold the Green Line, but part of the 51st Divn was to be ready to support the right, and to hold about two miles of the Red Line. The 6th Divn was to remain in reserve, and the 25th Division was to establish itself on the high ground near Sapignies, where from 8.30 A.M. onwards its 75th Brigade and the engineers had been entrenching. Two battalions of tanks (at Villers au Flos and Sapignies) were placed at the disposal of the 51st Divn and 41st Division; but they were not sent into action during the day.

By nightfall, all the troops of the IV. Corps had withdrawn to the Green Line or were behind it; by dawn they were firmly established on it and on the Red Line, with a good defensive flank on the left towards Mory, and in touch with the corps on either side. The casualties on the 23rd had been very heavy, but some reinforcements of men had come up during the night.

#### *VI. Corps*

It will be recalled that during the night of the 22nd/23rd March, the Green Line east of Mory and then the village itself had been lost, and the troops, the 177th Bde (59th Divn) and the extreme right of the 121st Brigade (40th

<sup>1</sup> On this front, "it was impossible for the German artillery to silence "the British". Goes, p. 97.

Division), which had defended the position so long and so valiantly against overwhelming odds, had fallen back. They had been directed by Br.-General James (177th) to reach and dig in on the higher ground west of the village, so that the retirement, which was uphill, should be completed by daylight. On this position, as it happened, they did not arrive until about 6 A.M., under fire from Mory and its neighbourhood. Then, with the help of reinforcements, nominally a battalion and a half—the 13/East Surrey, 119th Brigade, sent up by Br.-General Crozier, and the rest of the 20/Middlesex, 121st Brigade—they formed a rough, deep semi-circle facing Mory, being in touch on the right with the 120th Brigade, with which were the remnants of the 176th and 178th Bdes, in the Green Line. Between the left and the rest of the 121st Brigade, also on the Green Line, there was a gap of about five hundred yards, but this was presently filled by reinforcements. Northward of the 121st Brigade, the corps line crossed over to the Battle Zone, and continued in the front trenches of its rear system to the junction with the XVII. Corps.

The fighting in the VI. Corps area was practically confined to Mory and its neighbourhood ; it was brought about by the counter-action of the British, and not by the activity of the enemy; for the offensive spirit of the Germans opposite Lieut.-General Haldane's troops had been quenched, not only by their losses, but by the difficulty in getting up guns, munitions and supplies across the area devastated in 1917.

On the extreme right, as it grew light, the 120th Brigade could see the enemy massing<sup>1</sup> on the high ground northwest of Mory, and attempting to bring field guns into action. The 40th Division was not slow in taking advantage of such excellent targets, and continued throughout the day, assisted by air observers, to fire on troops in close formation and on transport. The Germans retaliated by bombardment ; but the infantry of the VI. Corps on the southern half of the semi-circle around Mory was not engaged, except the left battalion of the 120th Brigade, which had formed a defensive flank towards Mory and became involved to some extent in the fighting at that place. It repelled all attacks.

On the northern part of the semi-circle the rest of the 119th Brigade (18/Welch and 21/Middlesex), having been

<sup>1</sup> Troops of the 2nd Guard Reserve Division and 111th Division.

relieved by the extension to the right of the 4th Guards Brigade (31st Division), joined, in accordance with divisional orders, the 13/E. Surrey near Ervillers, with a view to attacking south-eastwards to recover Mory and the Green Line east of that village.

The first attack of the 119th Brigade began at 8.45 A.M., and, led by the 21/Middlesex, reached the high ground north-west of the village, where it was brought to a halt by the fire of German infantry lying on the far side of the wire of the Green Line. Under Br.-General Crozier's arrangements, a second attack was carried out at 2.30 P.M., in which the 13/E. Surrey bore the principal share ; it reached the western outskirts of Mory. Continued at 5 P.M., after reorganization, the whole village was captured, and the trench of the Green Line reached. Unfortunately it was found to be in very shattered condition, affording little or no cover. When, after some heavy shelling, the enemy counter-attacked about 8.30 P.M., he was at first repulsed ; but eventually, about midnight, parties of Germans broke through and again entered Mory. Casualties were mounting up and finally, about 3 A.M. on the 24th, the line of the 119th Brigade was withdrawn west of the village. This retirement was not observed by the enemy, who subsequently made a heavy attack on Mory, and was received with the concentrated fire of Lewis guns and rifles from the high ground beyond the village. Mory, however, was lost.

The front of the VI. Corps immediately north of Mory, including the units of the 34th Divn not already relieved, was shelled during the 23rd, but no infantry attacks were directed against it, except two minor efforts made in the morning and afternoon on the extreme left ; both of them were repulsed by the 13/York & Lancaster. Enemy attempts to bring up guns were also foiled by the artillery of the 34th Divn and 31st Division.

As a precautionary measure, in view of the fighting at Mory, the 92nd Brigade (31st Division), then in reserve, was moved towards Ervillers so as to safeguard the right flank. During the night of the 23rd/24th also the other two brigades (4th Guards and 93rd) of the 31st Division side-stepped southwards about a thousand yards on to the Green Line. A defensive flank was formed by troops of the 119th Brigade and 4th Guards Brigade who manned a sunken road leading from the northern edge of Ervillers

north-eastward to the Green Line, across the low ground north of Mory.

Against the 3rd Division, the left of the VI. Corps, and the XVII. Corps (15th and 4th Divisions), the Germans opened the day by a heavy bombardment from 5 to 8 A.M. of the British positions evacuated by order during the night. About 10 A.M., after further shelling, the enemy<sup>1</sup> having discovered what had happened, advanced in "pursuit". To use the words of a German historian,<sup>2</sup> the advance was made "against strong wired trenches, "in which the brave defenders, unshaken and not disheartened, were standing firm. There were more heavy "losses, and the attack came to a standstill".<sup>3</sup> Actually, after a short advance, the Germans stopped, and from 11.15 A.M. onwards there was no more than an interchange of sniping, during which some of the young recruits just out from England were seen standing up "to get a shot at "Fritz". Most of the day was spent by the 3rd, 15th and 4th Divisions in converting trenches, which had been little more than traced, into the semblance of a position. It was a sad task for troops who had been ordered to evacuate two complete defensive systems on which they had worked very hard for weeks, and on which they felt sure they could repel an enemy attack, however strong.

Thus, at the close of the 23rd the Third Army was in complete possession of the Green Line, except for about four thousand yards on the extreme right and for the Mory sector; from a little north of Mory it had retained part of the Battle Zone; while on the extreme left it still lay in the front of that zone.

The evening situation report sent to G.H.Q. at 7.7 P.M. reflects the confident tone that prevailed at Third Army headquarters. It ran:—

"V. Corps report as follows: 63rd Div. now on Green Line in touch with 47th Div. on right and 2nd Div. "on left.

"IV. Corps report 19th Division falling back towards "0.5 Central [Bancourt; it had been ordered to go into "reserve there]. Corps hold Green Line throughout their

<sup>1</sup> 236th Division, supported by the 26th Reserve Division.

<sup>2</sup> Of the 119th Reserve Regiment.

<sup>3</sup> The capture of a small piece of trench is claimed, but it appears to have been east of Wancourt, more than a thousand yards in front of the main British position.

" front. About 3.30 P.M. five attacks from Vaulx and five " from Beaumetz repulsed, as was attack about 12 noon " from east of Beugny.

" VI. Corps report 40th Div. recaptured Mory and now " holds Green Line east of it. No other changes corps front."

Then followed several paragraphs about the location of the new line held by the XVII. Corps, wire cutting, and the evident massing of troops and other signs of enemy activity on the front of that corps.

The oncoming of the German masses and the withdrawal of the British line were reported in some detail by air observers throughout the day. They had remarkable views of the struggle, as there was much less shell fire on both sides than in a trench warfare battle, and only one area—westward of Péronne, and that not until the afternoon—was obscured by smoke, due to the burning of stores in the town. For reasons to which reference has already been made, many calls to the artillery remained without response, but a number of wireless calls and dropped messages caused fire to be brought down on columns of German infantry. Low-flying attacks were made by aeroplanes sent out at fixed intervals all day, whilst the bombing squadrons devoted their attention to enemy reinforcements. All the corps aeroplanes, too, carried bombs, and the pilots and observers, who seldom flew above a thousand feet, took full advantage of the targets offered to them. They were involved in many combats, as enemy airmen were numerous and there was more air fighting on the 23rd than on the two previous days. Nevertheless, the British aviators were seldom prevented from fulfilling their tasks, whereas their opponents entirely failed even to attempt to interfere with the columns of refugees, lorries engaged in moving back aerodromes and dumps, transport, and troops with which the roads were covered. As a general result of the day, a total of 39 German aeroplanes was claimed as destroyed along the whole British front; of these only three were outside the battle area, and 28 were in the Third Army area. The R.F.C. lost five aeroplanes missing and 28 (6 outside the battle area) wrecked from all causes, whilst five temporarily unserviceable were burnt or abandoned.

During the night of the 23rd/24th March bombing in the battle area was confined to the German billets opposite the Third Army, and 663 25-lb. bombs were dropped and 14,000 rounds fired from the air.

During the day the 6th Divn (reserve of the IV. Corps) was transferred by G.H.Q. order to the Second Army, and left Achiet le Grand next morning. The 42nd Division (Major-General A. Solly-Flood) and the 62nd Division (Major-General W. P. Braithwaite) from the First Army, arrived in the Third Army area. The former (less artillery and transport) arrived by 'bus and assembled near Adinfer (6 miles S.S.W. of Arras), where at 11.30 P.M. the infantry was reported in bivouac ready to counter-attack; the latter, just relieved from the line north of Arras, assembled west of that town. The two divisions were placed temporarily under the VI. and XVII. Corps respectively, and the 187th Brigade (62nd Division) was at once attached to the 15th Division. The staff of the X. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir T. L. N. Morland), which for the moment had no divisions under it, was also put at the disposal of the Third Army. The headquarters of the Army were moved back at 7 P.M. from Albert to Beauquesne, which, having been used as Advanced G.H.Q., was ready equipped with offices and telephone communications. None of the corps headquarters of the Third Army were shifted on this day.

About 4 P.M. General Pétain visited Sir Douglas Haig at the latter's Advanced G.H.Q. at Dury, a few miles south of Amiens. He stated that he had arranged to put two Armies—a total of 11 divisions, a dismounted cavalry division and a cavalry division—under General Fayolle on the British right, as soon as the troops should all have arrived, adding that the only principle on which they could act would be to keep the Allied forces in touch. When Sir Douglas Haig requested that he should concentrate a larger force, say 20 divisions, near Amiens, the French Commander-in-Chief replied that he expected every moment the enemy would attack him in Champagne: still, he would do his utmost to keep touch with the British: for if contact were lost and the enemy broke in between the Allies, the British would probably be rounded up and driven into the sea: this must be prevented at all costs, even at the price of drawing back the northern wing on the coast, a move which would mean abandoning the Channel ports. For the purpose of maintaining liaison and of unity of command, he suggested that General Fayolle should take over all troops, British as well as French, between the Oise and Péronne. To this measure Sir Douglas Haig

agreed, and General Gough was warned that, as from 11 P.M. on the 24th, the forces of the Fifth Army south of Péronne would cease to be under G.H.Q. for operation purposes and come under the command of the French G.A.R. (Group of the Armies of Reserve).

This important relief of a difficult part of the line was welcome ; even more so the lightening of the anxiety which had been imposed on G.H.Q. by the length of the fighting front between the Oise and Arras, a front which at any moment might extend further northwards. But beyond this relief it was obvious that as long as General Pétain was in supreme command of the French forces the British would receive little further assistance from that side.

Reinforcements from home not yet being available Sir Douglas Haig had to see what further help he could himself furnish to the Fifth and Third Armies. At 7.30 P.M. he held a conference at G.H.Q. with the commanders of the First and Second Armies, who had been warned by General Lawrence, the C.G.S., during a visit earlier in the day. To his enquiries as to what troops could be spared to reinforce the Third and Fifth Armies, General Horne, who was expecting attacks against his right and centre in the near future, and had already sent two of his divisions, the 42nd and 62nd, to the Third Army, stated that he did not consider that he could give up any of his reserve divisions.

On the other hand, General Plumer was prepared to hold his line with eight divisions, thus releasing the 3rd and 4th Australian Divisions complete, and the 5th Australian Division (less artillery). He could even provide, he said, one more division, the 32nd, if the Belgians, who lay north of him between his left and the sea, would extend their right flank southwards to take over one of his divisional sectors. At the same time he stated that he wished to retain Passchendaele Ridge ; for if the Second Army abandoned it the Germans might imagine the whole line to be shaken. General Plumer was directed to get in touch with General Ruquoy, the Belgian Chief of the Staff, and if possible to arrange the relief he had suggested. Sir Douglas Haig further informed him that, as compensation to the Second Army for the loss of three divisions, General Pétain had consented that one of the divisions of the French XXXVI Corps, in rear of the left of the Belgians, should be placed at his disposal. It was finally decided that a force should be formed under Lieut.-General

Morland, with headquarters at Frévent (21 miles west of Arras) to consist of :—

3rd Australian Division, 4th Australian Division, 5th Australian Division (less artillery), 12th Division, from First Army, holding the line on its northern flank. New Zealand Division, from Second Army. 32nd Division—if the Belgians took over a divisional front from the Second Army.	} from } Second } Army.
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The orders issued by G.H.Q. as regards the construction of a new back line and the necessity of the Third and Fifth Armies keeping in closest touch in order to secure their junction have already been mentioned;<sup>1</sup> also the Third Army order, chiefly affecting the V. Corps, issued in consequence.<sup>2</sup>

General Byng, who during the day had informed his corps commanders that it was not yet decided whether a retirement would be made north-westwards to cover the Channel ports, or westwards, to keep in line with the French, made immediate arrangements for putting in hand the work on the new back line, known as the "Purple Line". From Dernancourt, just south of Albert, its front was to follow the Ancre as far as Miramont and thence to run first slightly north-westwards and then north-eastwards to join the defences of Arras.

It was subsequently arranged that about eight miles west of this line another system, to be known as the "G.H.Q. Line", was to be dug under the superintendence of the G.O.C. IX. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir A. Hamilton Gordon), who with his staff, as already mentioned, was to have taken command of any troops sent to assist the French.<sup>3</sup> He established his headquarters at Bernaville (8 miles W.S.W. of Doullens) next day. There were sent to assist him several officers of the Engineer-in-Chief's Staff; all R.E. officers who could be spared from the L. of C., the Director of Works, Major-General A. Stuart, himself coming for a time; the R.E. officers and men employed in the camouflage park and factories; the staffs and officers of the G.H.Q. schools; the personnel of the "Foreways" (forward tramlines, for the moment out of commission); and any others who could be made available.

<sup>1</sup> Appendices 25, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 27.

<sup>3</sup> See page 101.

These details were employed in siting and marking out the new lines, indicating the fire bays only, first by means of short tapes and then by shallow digging ; all available labour, not required for this digging, was used to erect wire. In the course of the next few weeks no less than five thousand miles of new trenches were prepared, the wire entanglements which covered part of these consuming 23,500 tons of barbed wire and 15 million wooden or steel pickets. The new systems extended right back to the old "B.C.D. Line", covering Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk, begun as a precaution in 1915. They provided not only for the case of the French remaining in touch with the British, but also against the event of their retiring away from them towards Paris. Seen from the air, in combination with the coast inundations and new railway diversions and bridges of which mention will be made later, they must, as the C.G.S. Lieut.-General Lawrence observed, at least have conveyed to the enemy the impression that the British Armies did not mean to yield without a long struggle.

#### NOTE

##### THE GERMANS ON THE 23RD MARCH

##### LUDENDORFF'S CHANGE OF PLAN<sup>1</sup>

The surprising success of General von Hutier against the Fifth Army had plainly shown that he had struck the weakest part of the British line ; the left of Marwitz's *Second Army* had also made progress, but its right and Below's *Seventeenth Army* had met with strong resistance.

"O.H.L. was face to face with a difficult decision. Should the "victorious course of the *Eighteenth Army* be arrested and a decision "forced on the right wing of attack by increased pressure, in spite of "the enemy's strong resistance ? Or did the tactical situation "demand a change of the original plan ?"

The German Crown Prince and Hutier's Chief of the Staff had, before the 21st March, advocated that the *Eighteenth Army* should be allowed to press on as soon as the Crozat canal and Somme had been crossed, for the purpose of defeating any French reserves which might be sent to the assistance of the British, and breaking through at the junction between the Allies. Ludendorff had then given no decision, but had permitted the *Eighteenth Army* to seize the canal crossings, if this were possible, instead of halting on the near bank

<sup>1</sup> Mainly from Kuhl, pp. 131-5.

and holding the water line defensively. None the less, he continued to bear the idea in mind and on the 20th March mentioned it to General von Kuhl, when discussing the further objectives of the German Armies if a really great victory were achieved.

In such a case the *Eighteenth Army* would be directed south-west on Noyon—Bray, the *Second* west on Amiens—Doullens and the *Seventeenth* north-west on St. Pol : not very different to the directions actually assigned to them on this day, the 23rd March. "Such a "dispersal of the Armies in three directions was thinkable only when, "as Ludendorff said, a great victory had been achieved, that is when "the enemy had been beaten on the whole front." On the 23rd this condition, says General von Kuhl, writing nine years after the event, had not been fulfilled. "The situation was considerably different. "It was solely a question whether the great success of the *Eighteenth Army* on the left should be exploited, in the hope that it would "carry forward the centre and right which were held up." But at the time Crown Prince Rupprecht was of the opinion that the British were in "a highly critical condition and should not be allowed "a moment's rest"; he believed that Ludendorff agreed with him in the expectation that the British would retire right back to the old positions occupied before the battle of the Somme. (Rupprecht ii. p. 352).

After taking into consideration the written reports rendered at the close of the 22nd and the first messages of the 23rd, which confirmed the good impression of the previous evening, Ludendorff made his decision. At 9.30 A.M. on the 23rd he issued the following general directive for the "continuation of the operations as soon as the line "Bapaume—Péronne—Ham has been reached": "Seventeenth "Army will vigorously attack direction Arras—St. Pol, left wing on "Miraumont [4½ miles west of Bapaume]. Second Army will take "Miraumont—Lihons [near Chaulnes] as direction of advance. "Eighteenth Army, echeloned, will take Chaulnes—Noyon as direction "of advance, and will send strong forces via Ham".

The three Armies were therefore to operate divergently northwards, westwards, and S.S.W. respectively.

In the afternoon Ludendorff had a conference at Avesnes with Kuhl and Schulenberg, the Chiefs of the General Staff of the two Groups of Armies concerned, in which he gave them the following additional information as to the views and intentions of O.H.L.

**Sketch 6.** "A considerable part of the British Army is beaten. The British "may still be estimated to have fifty divisions. It is no longer likely "that the French are still in a position to make an offensive [on their "own front] to relieve the pressure. They will be forced to come to "the Michael front [Haig's and Ludendorff's views were therefore "similar]. They have about forty divisions available.

"The object is now to separate the French and British by a rapid "advance on both sides of the Somme. The *Seventeenth* and *Sixth* "Armies [the latter lay to the north of the former] and later the "Fourth Army [on the right of the *Sixth*] will conduct the attack "against the British north of the Somme, in order to drive them into "the sea. They will keep on attacking at new places (Mars, Valkyrie "etc.) in order to bring the whole British front to ruin. The *Seventeenth Army* will take St. Pol as the main direction and will push "with its left wing via Doullens in the direction of Abbeville. South "of the Somme the operations will be conducted offensively against

" the French by a wheel to the line Amiens—Montdidier—Noyon and " then an advance south-westward. In so doing the *Second Army* " must push forward on both sides of the Somme on Amiens and keep " close touch of the *Eighteenth Army*."

General von Kuhl comments on this :—

" Thus there was a complete change of plan. Hitherto the main feature had been the attack of the *Second* and *Seventeenth Armies* against the British. To the *Eighteenth Army* fell only the protection of the attack from the French. Now the French and British were to be separated and both attacked simultaneously. This meant shifting the whole attack a good way to the left."

He might have added that there were not only three directions but three objects : to separate the French and British, to drive the British into the sea, and to defeat the French. These manifold objectives in reality required more troops than Ludendorff had at his disposal.

The *Seventh Army* was directed to be prepared to send more divisions (it had already sent three) to its western neighbour, the *Eighteenth Army*, while the three divisions of the O.H.L. reserve were sent to the three corps facing Arras to assist in extending the attack northwards : the *2nd Guard Division* to the *I Bavarian Reserve Corps*, the *12th Division* to the *III Bavarian Corps* and the *26th Division* to the *IX Reserve Corps*.

In general, as we already know, on the German front south of Ytres, the 23rd March went very favourably for the *Eighteenth Army* and the right of the *Second*. Northward of this the Germans were held up on the Green Line. But both O.H.L. and Crown Prince Rupprecht's headquarters were deceived as to the true state of affairs there, as the *Seventeenth Army* reported that it had taken Monchy le Preux by attack, whereas the position had been deliberately evacuated without any fighting. The *Second Army* announced it had captured " the whole Third Position [Green Line] between the Cologne and " Nurlu " causing Crown Prince Rupprecht to write " Any of the " enemy forces still in the Cambrai salient must now fall into our " hands ". It seems that this information, and air reports that " the " roads behind the British front were for a long distance covered with " continuous streams of hurrying columns of all kinds, trains and " ammunition columns as well as troops ", reached Ludendorff before he made his decision (Rupprecht ii. p. 351). The conclusion that because the Allies retired they were beaten, the " shout hurrah " mood of August 1914, and the whole German attitude just before the battle of the Marne seem to have been repeated in March 1918.

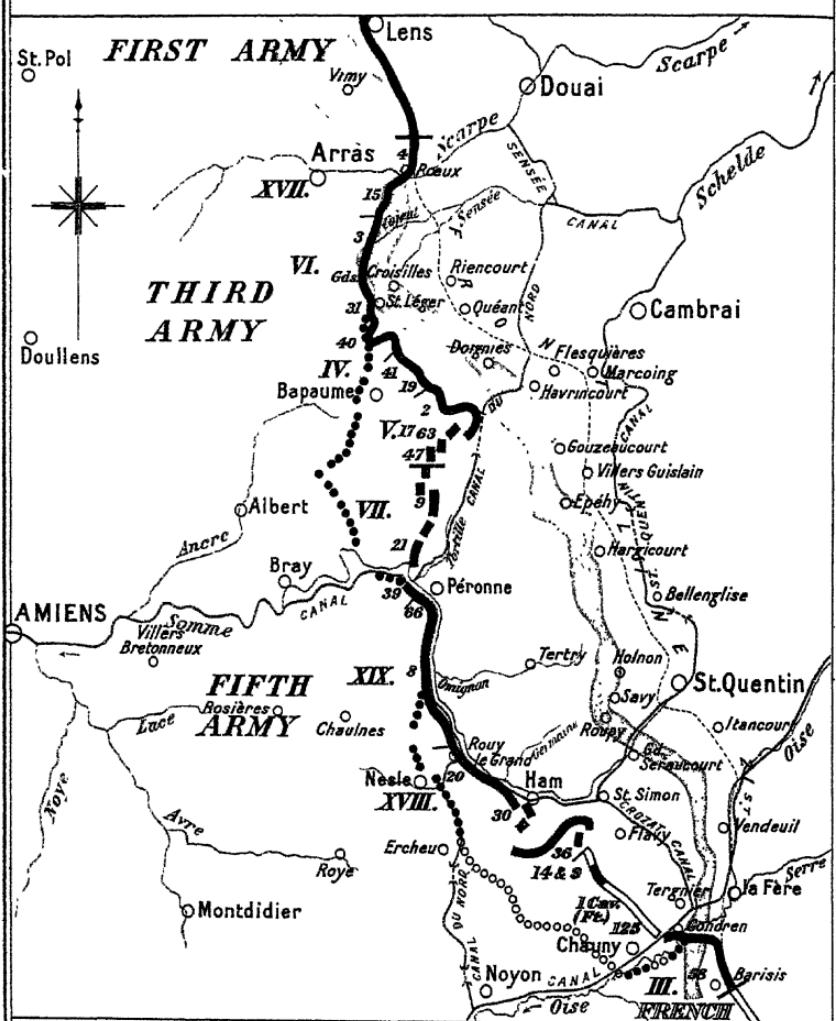
The orders of the *Seventeenth Army*, issued on the evening of the Map 7. 23rd showed that General von Below had grossly overestimated the measure of his success. He directed his right, the *I Bavarian Reserve Corps*, to follow the retreating enemy and prepare for the break-through ; the *III Bavarian*, *IX Reserve* and *XVIII Corps*, opposite Arras, to capture the heights west and south-west of the town and push the British back north-westwards, while the three southernmost corps, the *VI Reserve*, *XIV Reserve*, and *XI*, held up on the Green Line by the *VI*. and *IV*. Corps, were to capture the high ground around Bapaume. The last named German corps was to reach out towards the *Second Army* in order to complete the cutting off of the Flesquieres Salient, whilst on reaching Bapaume the *VI Reserve* and *XIV Reserve* were to turn north-westwards to join in pushing back the British near Arras.

Map 6. The *Second* and *Eighteenth Armies* were already aligned on the Somme and on the Somme and Crozat canals, ready to go forward in the new directions, west and south-west, assigned to them. There was no doubt about the latter Army being able to make progress ; for, except on its right wing, it was already well across the water line. The *Second Army*, as Crown Prince Rupprecht points out, had still to cross the very wide and marshy valley of the Somme, and "to bridge "the Somme in this sector, the bridging material was scarcely "sufficient ; more of it would have to be obtained from the *Fourth Army*".



*Sketch 17.*

## 24<sup>TH</sup> MARCH.



## CHAPTER XV<sup>1</sup>

### THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

24TH MARCH 1918

#### FIFTH ARMY

(Maps 8 and 9 ; Sketch 17)

AFTER a bitterly cold night, during which artillery fire had died down to give place on both sides to the bombing of rear areas from the air, Palm Sunday, the 24th March, dawned like the previous days, shrouded in heavy mist. In the valleys of the rivers, where lay the troops of the Fifth Army and the French divisions which had come to their assistance, this pall hung in the air until between 9 and 10 A.M. ; but on the chalk downs in the zone of the Third Army it thinned and cleared earlier.

During the 24th, a considerable amount of ground was lost, both in the Fifth and Third Army areas. In the former French troops, without artillery or transport, and with no more ammunition than what they carried on the person, had relieved the III. Corps, but only to retire through the British directly the Germans advanced. Where French divisions were in support, as on the left of the III. Corps and the right of the XVIII., they fell back when they saw the British in front of them doing so. The Somme line north of Ham, where the Germans had already gained a small bridgehead, was lost by the XVIII. Corps and by the right of the XIX. Corps, nearly as far as St. Christ. The enemy thus obtained a greatly increased foothold west of the river. But northward of the above sector, the line of the Somme was maintained up to, but excluding, Péronne. North of this town, the Third Army had failed on

<sup>1</sup> The account of the French movements in this and the succeeding chapters is taken from F.O.A. Tome vi. (i) ; the quotations in this chapter in inverted commas are from this volume unless otherwise stated.

the 23rd to keep touch with the left of the Fifth, and so the Germans were able to press into the gap between the two Armies : the VII. Corps had to give ground, and the V. Corps (Third Army) formed a long defensive flank ; but in the course of the afternoon, General Byng, in order to regain touch with the Fifth Army, gave instructions for a general retirement of the latter corps, which involved a swing back of the IV. Corps and of part of the VI. Corps.

The divisions of the Fifth Army were now fighting and moving in small bodies, often composed of men of different units,<sup>1</sup> frequently with parties of Germans mixed up with them, so that it was almost impossible for the corps or divisional staffs to ascertain the position of the front line.

After three days of battle, with each night spent upon the march or occupied in the sorting out and reorganization of units, the troops—Germans as well as British—were tired almost to the limit of endurance. The British, at any rate, were short of food and often of ammunition : rations and ammunition were duly sent up, but as the troops were so rapidly changing position and constantly coming under different commanders, the issue of supplies was a matter of extreme difficulty. As a rule they were dumped, and units drew from them as they passed. The physical and mental strain of the struggle against overwhelming odds, the heavy losses, the sinister rumours which were rife, all contributed to depress morale. Yet never did the men lose heart or think of abandoning the combat ; when they strayed from or lost their units, they would rally on any officer who called upon them. Some were so worn out that, when one battered division withdrew into reserve and was later ordered to the front again, the infantry had to be given half an hour's rest after each mile. In such circumstances, when a unit was ordered to occupy a position, a number of men, so tired that they appeared to be unconscious of their surroundings, would be pushed into a shallow trench by an equally tired officer, and most of them would fall asleep under fire, as the Old Army had done at “First Ypres”.

By the orders of the Chief Engineers of corps, the tunnelling companies, R.E. details, and any available men, sited rear positions, but could only mark them by shallow digging. Unfortunately, the divisions, with their

<sup>1</sup> One lieutenant-colonel reported that he had collected and was commanding nine hundred men of eleven different units.

terribly reduced numbers and trifling reinforcements, were responsible for sectors longer than they had held on the 21st March, so that gaps inevitably multiplied in the weak line of defence, until, as one German account<sup>1</sup> describes the situation, the British were only holding "islands". There was no continuous line except on the VI. and XVII. Corps front. The troops, however, were seldom fought out of their positions ; but, as already mentioned, were time after time outflanked, and, finding Germans working past them, retired.<sup>2</sup> Occasionally a counter-attack was made, but the reserves were so small that, when employed in this fashion, their destruction was almost inevitable.

On the German side most of the divisions in second line and in reserve, even the general reserve under O.H.L., had been sent up into the battle : if the enemy continued to push on, there was nothing to be done except continue the retirement until substantial reinforcements could reach the fighting line. It was heartbreaking to receive orders to hold the line of the Somme at all costs and to maintain other lines with the utmost determination. These orders if obeyed often involved the annihilation of the troops concerned. Some units, in fact, were so sacrificed, but the orders to hold on did not reach all. The precious connection by wire from divisional headquarters back to the corps had been maintained ; forward of these headquarters messages were carried by mounted men, cyclists and runners who were just as tired, if not more tired, than the rest of the troops, and often had little chance of locating the units to which they were sent. So communications grew more and more precarious, and, in the absence of orders, battalions, even brigades, acted as seemed best.

To continue the description of events on the scale hitherto adopted, mentioning all the small units and detachments would take many pages and obscure the general narrative. Henceforward only a broad outline will, as a rule, be given : the confusion which prevailed must be left to the imagination.

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> The enemy method of firing machine guns in enfilade rather than straight to the front led the partially trained troops to imagine that they were being fired on from behind or outflanked, and they often retired for this reason alone. Stories subsequently obtained currency that Germans, disguised in British Staff uniforms, gave orders for retirement, not only to infantry but to batteries and transport. There seems to be no foundation for this story ; possibly such orders were given by officers whose faces were not known to the troops.

*III. Corps*

**Map 8.** On the right wing of the Fifth Army, General Pellé of Sketch 17. the French V. Corps<sup>1</sup> had taken over the front of the

III. Corps north of the Oise, commanding all the troops, French and British, comprised therein. The main feature of the area is the long ridge, dotted with large woods, which runs north-eastward from Noyon towards Jussy, the ground on either side falling towards the Oise and the Somme. Nominally the British troops were now in support and reserve, with the exception of that part of the 14th Divn which still held the left; actually the British still formed much of the front line.

About 6.30 A.M. in the fog the enemy renewed his attacks, and the men of the French 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division fell back for want of ammunition. This entailed the retirement of the French 125th Division, and by 8.30 A.M. the Germans were advancing in the mist on the British support positions; in places, after repeated attempts, they came within twenty yards of them. The four leading battalions of the French 55th Division were sent up to General Diébold (125th Division), but were unable to stop the retirement, and General Pellé at 9 A.M. placed the whole of the 55th at the disposal of General Diébold—the 55th and 125th Divisions then forming Groupe Diébold—with a view to counter-attack. This idea was subsequently abandoned, and the 55th Division used as a “barrage” to check the German advance.

The brigade of the British 58th Divn north of the Oise, with the 6th Dismounted Brigade, was swept back with the French, and about 4.30 P.M., accompanied by the 18th Entrenching Battalion and numerous French troops, crossed the Oise canal at Abbécourt, and rejoined the rest of the division. The Condren garrison, having run short of ammunition, also withdrew. By evening, therefore, there were no troops of the 58th Divn north of the Oise. A flank was formed along the river, and the bridges over both the river and canal were destroyed by the divisional engineers as the German advance progressed westwards.

<sup>1</sup> 1st Dismounted Cavalry (shown on the maps as 1st Cavalry (Ft.)), 125th, 9th and 10th Divisions, with the 55th Division arriving.

Part of the 9th Division and all the 10th were in support of the XVIII. Corps, behind which the French 22nd and 62nd Divisions, under command of General Robillot (II. Cavalry Corps), were coming up.

Until the 31st March, no further attack was made on the 58th Divn.

At 10 A.M. when it became clear that the French were falling back all along the line, Major-General Lee ordered the brigades of the 18th Divn, then in reserve, to take up position and dig in on the long cross ridge which runs through Caillouel and Beaugies. French troops eventually formed on the right and left of the 18th Divn, and the position of its line turned out to be the limit of the day's retirement. But at midnight, the enemy having worked round the left flank, a further retirement of some thousand yards was made together with the French to the next cross ridge, where the remnants of the 53rd, 54th and 55th Bdes remained in the front line. Of the dismounted cavalry, the 3rd, 7th and Canadian Dismounted Brigades were withdrawn in the morning to Dampcourt ( $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles W.S.W. of Chauny), where, under Br.-General J. E. B. Seely, they became General Pellé's reserve, and did not come into action.

The part of the front held by the 14th Divn and 4th and 5th Dismounted Brigades, in the midst of the French 9th Division, was not attacked in the early morning; accordingly at 10.45 A.M., the French having taken over the whole of the line, orders were issued for the 14th Divn (less artillery) and the dismounted cavalry to withdraw gradually and concentrate behind the woods at Ferme des Grandes Beines, about two miles in rear of the front. About noon, when this movement was still in progress, the French 9th Division was seen to be retiring all along the line. This division had only been "feeblely attacked", but, its right had been uncovered by the retirement of the French 1st Dismounted Cavalry, and Germans appeared from Ugny behind that flank. General Gamelin had accordingly issued orders for withdrawal out of the awkward salient in which the division was placed. French infantry and artillery streamed through the 14th Divn, the troops of which were waiting on a reverse slope, and then took up a defensive position on the cross ridge west and south of it. The 14th Divn was not, however, attacked, and between 2 and 4 P.M. withdrew through the French to Crissolles ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles north of Noyon). At "the end of the day" the French 9th Division, threatened on the right, although reinforced by General Pellé's last reserve, a regiment of the French 10th Division, again fell back; followed by the enemy it "re-formed, very shaken, during the night on the

"position through Quesmy", alongside the French 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division. It had made a retirement of over five miles.

At 8.45 P.M. during the latter part of this movement, the 14th Divn received orders to fall back from Crissolles, across the Canal du Nord—at this point a deep excavation with no water—so as to take position covering the crossings at Beaurains and Sermaize, (3 miles north of Noyon). The object was to protect the mass of heavy artillery which, by order of General Pellé, had been collected west of Noyon ; the movement was executed during the night.

Of the batteries of the III. Corps, those of the 58th Divn had retired with it south of the Oise ; this left 98 field guns and howitzers and the artillery of the French 125th Division and 60 heavy guns, in action to support the Allied battle-line north of the river.

### *XVIII. Corps*

The XVIII. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir I. Maxse) found itself in an unenviable position on the morning of the 24th except that its left, the 20th Division, still held the line of the Somme. The 36th Divn, on the right, was in a dangerous salient, with a gap in the eastern side, and the enemy threatening its right and left in a manner which precluded all hope of the division maintaining its position. In the centre of the corps line, the success of the Germans in forcing the passage of the Somme at Pithon and Ham had not only secured them a substantial bridgehead, but had also driven a deep wedge between the 36th and 30th Divns, and forced the latter westwards as well as northwards in a somewhat disjointed line. French help, however, was close at hand, as, during the night of the 23rd/24th, parts of the French 9th and 10th Divisions had occupied a thinly held support line behind the 36th and 30th Divns, and the heads of the French 62nd and 22nd Divisions had arrived within six miles of the front line of the 30th and 20th Divisions, near Ercheu and Cressy, respectively. Further, the British 61st Divn, certainly sadly depleted, was in reserve.<sup>1</sup>

The enemy made no infantry attack on the 36th Divn during the early hours of the morning, being uncertain of

<sup>1</sup> The 182nd Bde attached to the 20th Division at Hombleux ; the 183rd and divisional engineers at Nesle, and the 184th, further south, at Billancourt.

its exact position owing to the fog, and at 9.5 A.M. orders were issued for the battalions of the 61st Bde (20th Division), at the head of the salient, to begin a gradual withdrawal at 11 A.M. At this hour the enemy attacked and, following up the 61st Bde, at the same time completely turned the right flank of the 109th, next to it, so that the two brigades fell back on the trenches in front of Villeselvey, where the French 9th Division was already established, with the British 14th Divn on its right. In their turn, the 108th Bde and divisional troops, their flank being uncovered, also withdrew to the French line. The 2/R. Irish Rifles (107th Bde) and the 12/King's (61st Bde), holding the lower right flank of the salient, being more to the east, escaped attack until the Germans renewed their advance about 1 P.M. The messenger sent to these battalions with the orders to retire never arrived, and as the ground in their rear was entirely destitute of cover and practically flat, they decided that when attacked they would fight it out where they stood. During the afternoon they were overwhelmed,<sup>1</sup> only a few men of the 12/King's reaching Villeselvey in the line held by the 36th Divn and the French 9th Division.

Towards 3 P.M. two German divisions converged on this locality from the north and north-west<sup>2</sup> and the Allied troops gave way. The enemy was then temporarily checked by the advance of part of Harman's Detachment. Major-General Harman had sent the 3rd Cavalry Division detachment, under Lieut.-Colonel R.W. Paterson, Fort Garry Horse, to establish a flank position in the woods on the right of the retiring troops. This done, by the detachments of the 7th and Canadian Cavalry Brigades, Lieut.-Colonel Paterson sent the 6th Cavalry Brigade contingent (150 strong) away to the left, to Collézy, which it could approach unseen by a shallow valley, giving it instructions to charge through the Germans in front and then swing right-handed along the enemy line, using the sword only. The manœuvre was successfully carried out, in spite of machine-gun fire from the north-west (Golancourt), and the survivors rejoined the Canadian Cavalry detachments. Seventy-three men out of the 150 had fallen, but the confidence

<sup>1</sup> According to "Guard Gren. Regt. No. 5", two regiments were held up at the point in question from 10 A.M. to 3 P.M. by two or three companies and a few machine guns.

<sup>2</sup> The 36th and 5th Guard Divisions, which had forced the passage of the Somme at Pithon on the previous day.

of the infantry was restored ; men of the 108th and 109th Bdes followed up the cavalry success, and for a time all seemed well.

The enemy, however, recovered from his surprise and advanced once more ; the infantry, unable to hold on, fell back again on Villeselve.<sup>1</sup> By this time the position near the village was hopeless, for the portion of the French 9th Division east of it had been driven back, while the Germans were pressing in on the west. Covered by a screen formed by the 3rd Cavalry Division detachments, the remnants of the 36th Divn retired S.S.W. to a good rear line prepared by the French in front of Buchoire—Guiscard. The confusion of the retreat was considerably increased by French troops of the 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division and 9th Division (already mentioned in connection with the 14th Divn), who, heading westwards towards Guiscard and Berlancourt from their old front, moved across the line of march.

"The retirement of the 9th Division entailed that of "the 10th, although the division had not been seriously "attacked during the day." But the French 9th Division was unable to remain on its prepared position : a threat to its right flank entailed a further withdrawal not only of the 9th and 10th Divisions, but also of the 36th Divn to a line between Quesmy and Guiscard, thence running north-westwards to Hospital Farm. Here they joined with the French 62nd Division which had come up to the front line. At 11 P.M. the French front line being continuous though thin, the infantry and engineers of the 36th Divn, leaving the 61st Bde for a time in a support position south-west of Guiscard, were withdrawn and concentrated, ready to act as a reserve, at Sermaize (3 miles north of Noyon) and Ecuilly (3 miles N.N.W. of Sermaize). The artillery remained at the disposal of the French 9th and 62nd Divisions.

The left of the 80th Divn, the centre of the XVIII. Corps, on the morning of the 24th still held the line of the Somme, its centre and right, bent back in consequence of the enemy's success in crossing the river at Ham. It was, however, not known at Major-General Williams's

<sup>1</sup> The German account is that "five English squadrons, followed by "infantry, rode an audacious charge from Villeselve. Part of the Guard "fell back a bit, but soon recovered themselves and drove the Englishmen "back whence they had come". Goes, pp. 118-9.

headquarters that the Germans had pushed forward as far as Golancourt (3 miles south of Ham). Thus it came as a most unpleasant surprise when the 2/Bedfordshire, sent up to extend the flank southwards and gain touch with the 36th Divn on the right, encountered Germans instead.

Behind the thin front line held by the 90th Bde there were in support only the remnants of the 89th Bde, formed into a composite battalion, and the 11/South Lancashire (Pioneers), with the weak 21st Bde dug in in front of Esmery Hallon.

After a fairly heavy bombardment of the river line, the enemy, between 7 and 8 A.M. advanced in the thick mist from the Ham bridgehead against the centre of the position; also, by means of pontoons and boats, he crossed the Somme at Canizy and northwards, and so attacked the left.<sup>1</sup> There was little time to organize resistance, and counter-attacks delivered at the crossing places by the small available forces had slight effect against constantly increasing numbers. Thus by 9 A.M., the left and centre of the 30th Divn were retiring southwards on Esmery Hallon, and the right flank conformed. The men rallied on the 21st Bde, and held the enemy for a short time, but soon after 10.30 A.M. the withdrawal of the 30th Divn was continued. After the artillery had been sent back, its infantry, much mixed together, crossed the Canal du Nord at Lannoy Farm. In accordance with arrangements previously decided upon in case of a withdrawal of the 30th Divn and 20th Division becoming necessary, they formed behind the canal, where the French 62nd Division was in position.

The frontal attacks on the 20th Division near Offoy and Buny—Voyennes were all repulsed. Although the iron bridge at Voyennes had been blown up on the evening of the 23rd, some Germans got across, but, forced to take shelter among the ruins, they were dealt with by hand grenades. In the meantime a right defensive flank had been formed when the 30th Divn fell back; and about noon the enemy pushed north-westward from Esmery Hallon against this flank. About the same time, by using boats and rafts under cover of a heavy artillery barrage, he succeeded in putting some men across the two narrow branches of the Somme and the canal at Voyennes. Having also crossed, about 11 A.M., at Béthencourt, further north

<sup>1</sup> The 231st, 50th and 206th Divisions, the last from second line, attacked. Goes, p. 117.

in the XIX Corps area, he swept away the 11/Rifle Brigade, the left battalion of the 20th Division.

By 2.30 P.M. the Germans were in Grécourt ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles north-west of Esmery Hallon), near the Canal du Nord, thus enveloping the right flank of the division ; at the same time they were fighting their way through Voyennes, and thus turned the left. A general retirement, as pre-arranged, was then made to and behind the Canal du Nord, where the 184th Bde (61st Divn) was already digging in.

As soon as the news of the enemy's crossing at Béthen-court reached the 20th Division, Major-General Douglas Smith ordered the 183rd Bde (61st Divn) then at Nesle, supported by a Canadian battery of motor machine guns, to march to an assembly position  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles N.N.E of Nesle, and counter-attack. Begun about midday, the movement at first went well, but the brigade met with ever-increasing resistance, and was forced to fall back ;<sup>1</sup> finally between 3 and 4 P.M. it was withdrawn behind the canal to rejoin the 20th Division.

Thus by the late afternoon, the 30th Divn and 20th Division were behind the great excavation of the Canal du Nord<sup>2</sup> from Lannoy Farm on the right, where touch was obtained with the French 62nd Division which had the French 10th Division on its right, to the end of the canal near Nesle ; thence they held a line along a spur to Mesnil St. Nicaise. At 4.45 P.M., by order of the French Third Army, all British troops in the 62nd Division area (from the Freniches—Esmery Hallon road to Buverchy bridge, some  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles north of Lannoy) were placed under General Margot of that division ; and, acting under instructions from him,<sup>3</sup> Major-General Williams, at 5.10 P.M. issued orders for the 90th Bde to remain in position from Lannoy Farm to Buverchy bridge (inclusive), and for the 21st and 89th Bdes, with the 182nd, to move to support positions behind it. This movement was carried out during the night.

To the left of the 30th Divn, the 60th and 59th Brigades and the 184th Bde, under the 20th Division, held the

<sup>1</sup> According to "Gren. Regt. No. 12", the German advance was held up for about four hours by this counter-attack.

<sup>2</sup> The bed in this sector, 45 to 60 feet wide, and 20 feet below ground level, was covered with rushes, with a depth of one to two feet of water.

<sup>3</sup> He was replaced in command of the 62nd on 29th March by General Girard, whilst General Capdepont of the 22nd Division was replaced by General Renouard on the 27th.

line to Mesnil St. Nicaise (passing south-west of the village), with the 183rd Bde forming a left defensive flank towards Potte. The greatest anxiety was felt with regard to the left flank of the division, as the 8th Division (XIX. Corps) next to it had fallen back, so that a gap of at least two miles intervened between the two divisions. At length it was ascertained by the 9/Royal Scots, the left battalion of the 183rd Bde, that the 25th Brigade (8th Division) would occupy Dreslincourt (about 2,000 yards south-west of Potte) about 6 P.M. As the enemy held Mesnil St. Nicaise, the 183rd Bde took position from about the centre of Mesnil le Petit to the eastern corner of the wood east of Dreslincourt. Actually, the 25th Brigade was not strong enough to find men to occupy the village, and the 8th Division therefore despatched the 490th Field Company R.E. and a pioneer company (22/Durham L.I.). These troops arrived at Dreslincourt about 10.30 P.M., but in view of a projected counter-attack by the 8th Division, they did not remain there. At dawn, therefore, on the 25th there existed a gap of nearly a mile between the left of the 20th Division and the right of the 8th, which was five hundred yards north-west of Potte.

The French 22nd Division had come up with orders to extend in support behind the 30th Divn and 20th Division, with its reserve of four battalions in echelon behind the right, south-west of Nesle. These orders were never complied with, as the advance of the Germans led to the division being spread out along the valley of the Ingou, on which stream Nesle is situated, behind the British 59th Brigade and 183rd Bde, in order to cover the left flank of the troops of the French Third Army. Neither the 22nd nor the 62nd Division had as yet received its artillery, so the whole of the batteries of the XVIII. Corps were still kept in action, though some of the infantry had been relieved.

### *XIX. Corps*

The front of the XIX. Corps, from Béthencourt (inclusive) to Biaches opposite Péronne, followed for its whole extent the western bank of the Somme. The greater part of this front, eight miles in length, was held by the 8th Division (with the 151st Bde, 50th Divn, attached), only a small sector on the left being guarded by the 66th Divn. The battered 24th Divn and the rest of the 50th were in reserve. The artillery of the 50th Divn had not yet come

Sketch  
17.  
Map 9.

up (it was in action on the morning of the 25th), but 209 field and 62 heavy guns were still available.<sup>1</sup>

In this sector, also, the orders were to hold on, maintaining a heavy, continuous bombardment on all villages opposite possible crossings, and on approaches to crossings, while remaining in readiness to counter-attack with strong reserves if the enemy forced a passage at any point. Lieut-General Watts, however, had made preparations for a retirement to the high ground near Chaulnes, five miles in rear, if the corps line should be broken and could not be restored. Divisional commanders were informed of this plan, with the proviso that, " it is to be clearly understood " that there is no intention to withdraw, but to fight the " battle out on the line now held ".

At dawn the enemy favoured by the thick mist, renewed his efforts to cross the Somme on the corps front. Although desperate and repeated attempts were made, his only success was on its right ; but as this advance caused grave danger and embarrassments, the events of the day will be described from left to right, taking the danger point last. In the sector of the 66th Divn, opposite Péronne, there was shelling all day ; in the afternoon the enemy was very active also with rifle, machine-gun and trench-mortar fire from the buildings standing on the northern side of the canalized river close to the water's edge, whence he completely commanded the southern bank. About 6.30 P.M. a German battalion, which had crossed the stream man by man over a footbridge built on the previous night, near the road bridge south of Péronne, established itself behind the ramparts of an old fort. From this small bridgehead a counter-attack by the 1/5th Durham L.I. (151st Bde) failed to dislodge the enemy.

At Eterpigny, all attempts by the Germans during the day to reach the canal across the marshes were defeated, but after dark they managed to get close up to the eastern bank. At St. Christ the most desperate efforts were made by the enemy,<sup>2</sup> but they were all repulsed.

<sup>1</sup> The 9.2-inch and 8-inch howitzers were sent back at 2.15 P.M., in view of the difficulty of moving them quickly.

At 1 P.M. the command of the artillery was re-organized : the C.R.A. 50th Divn took over the whole of the guns covering the 8th Division front, those covering the 66th Divn reverting to the command of the C.R.A. of the latter division.

<sup>2</sup> " So that the name of the place became ' Hell ' for the column [two regiments] of Lieut.-Colonel von Stoeklern." Goes, p. 115. It is claimed that parts of two regiments got across the canal towards evening, but were driven back by a bayonet charge and " only very few escaped ".

On the right, the fight went against the British. During the night German patrols discovered a practicable way through the swampy woods right up to the canal bank, and parts of two divisions (*5th* and *28th*) succeeded in forcing a passage a quarter to half a mile north of Béthencourt by means of footbridges which had been completed at about 4 A.M. By 8 A.M. sufficient German troops were on the western bank to be able to push on, and by 9 A.M. Béthencourt was lost, in spite of a good stand made west of the village by the *2/East Lancashire*, assisted by low-flying aeroplanes, and by heavy artillery ranged, for the only occasion on this day, from the air. As we have seen, the left of the *20th Division*, next on the south, had been driven off. Reinforced by two companies of the *2/R. Berkshire*, the *East Lancashire* held on until 11 A.M. when they were forced to retire on Morchain.

At Pargny, a mile and a half north of Béthencourt, the *2/Rifle Brigade* successfully resisted frontal attack; but more Germans crossed near Béthencourt, and one regiment attacked Pargny from the south, so that the *Rifle Brigade* was threatened on two sides and compelled to retire on Morchain. This village was then held by the *25th Brigade* until nearly 5 P.M., when, after the failure of the counter-attack of the *183rd Bde* to recover Béthencourt, further enemy attacks caused a withdrawal to a line of old trenches between Morchain and Potte.

The loss of Pargny and the retirement of the *25th Brigade* led the *24th*, next on the north, first to form a defensive flank, and then to withdraw its right from the Somme in order to keep touch with the *25th*. By the late afternoon, the *8th Division* line was showing a gap on the right, where it was out of touch with the *20th Division*, even when all the divisional engineers of the latter had been used as infantry to increase the front. The line then ran from behind Morchain north-eastward to the canal bank, about a thousand yards south of St. Christ, from which point northwards the line of the canal was still held. To fill the gap, nearly a mile wide, the only available troops, one engineer field company and one pioneer company were sent, as we have seen, to Dreslincourt.<sup>1</sup>

When, at 4.30 P.M., the report of the forcing of the

<sup>1</sup> The *150th Bde*, in reserve at Belloy en Santerre (6 miles N.N.W. of Morchain), was ordered, about 11 A.M., to march southwards across country to Marchelepot, about half-way to Morchain. It was found impossible to

passage of the Somme near Béthencourt reached Fifth Army headquarters, General Gough, who had visited the headquarters of the XIX. and VII. Corps during the afternoon, concerted measures with General Robillot (commanding the French 22nd and 62nd Divisions with the headquarters staff of the II. Cavalry Corps) for a counter-attack to drive back the enemy. Owing to the slow arrival of the 22nd Division, it was found that this could not be attempted until next day. General Fayolle, who came to Fifth Army headquarters about 5 P.M., concurred in the arrangements proposed, and at 7.30 P.M., when the success of the Germans had been confirmed, the Fifth Army issued orders which, after giving a précis of the situation, continued :—

“ The French 22nd Division is moving to-night to “ occupy the line Rouy le Grand [3 miles north-east of “ Nesle]—Mesnil St. Nicaise, and will to-morrow attack “ from south to north. The 8th Division will co-operate “ by attacking from west to east. The French II. Cavalry “ Corps [that is, General Robillot] will be responsible for “ the plan of operations and for the conduct of the attack. “ The XIX. Corps will make all necessary arrangements, “ including artillery support, for the attack of the 8th “ Division. The XVIII. Corps will detail at least eight “ batteries under a B.G.R.A., to come under the orders of “ the French 22nd Division [whose artillery had not “ arrived], to support that division’s attack. All arrange- “ ments to be made direct between the two British corps “ and the French II. Cavalry Corps.”

Lieut.-General Watts (XIX. Corps) therefore issued orders at 9 P.M. for the right of the 8th Division to co-operate, and for the 24th Divn (then at Chaulnes, and since 4 P.M. entrenching to the south-west of the town) to support the attack, moving early on the 25th into the gap between the XVIII. and XIX. Corps. The engineer and pioneer companies in Dreslincourt were to be shifted away by 5 A.M. so as to leave the valley clear for the counter-attack ; the remaining brigades of the 50th Divn

do so, as the route traversed the devastated area. A way round by road on which limbers could move was found, but the brigade did not reach Marchelepot until after dark.

The “ 66th Divn Wing ”, a battalion made up of the Divisional Musketry School staff, and 1,200 men, cooks, batmen, etc., mostly elderly, and some without helmets or gas masks, remained behind the left flank of the division.

were to move up, one to the 66th Divn and the other to Estrées, ready to assist at Eterpigny or St. Christ. All available heavy artillery was to support the attack, although as some batteries had already been moved back, only 53 guns were actually in position on the 25th.

During the night two staff officers of the 24th Divn visited General Robillot's headquarters; no operation orders had been written and the C.R.A. 8th Division, who was there, said that he could obtain none. The officers, after obtaining an outline of what was intended, returned and reported to XIX. Corps headquarters that no counter-attack was seriously contemplated by the French and, as will be seen, none took place.

### VII. *Corps*

Like the other corps commanders, Lieut.-General Congreve had received G.H.Q. instructions to maintain his line, and, like them, he had selected and notified to his divisional commanders the various positions to which retirement should, under compulsion, be made. The first ran from Feuillières on the Somme, four thousand yards behind the actual front line, and the second from Curlu, another two thousand five hundred yards in rear. Some assistance was in sight, since the 1st Cavalry Division had been transferred from the XIX. Corps and, being only twelve miles to the southward, might be expected to arrive during the day. The 35th Division also had detrained during the night at Corbie and stations near, 14 to 17 miles away.

No attack was made on the 39th Division south of the Somme, with the 16th Divn in reserve behind it,<sup>1</sup> so opportunity was taken during the day to pour enfilade fire into the Germans advancing north of the river, the 117th Brigade lengthening its line westward. At 5.20 P.M. the VII. Corps specially ordered the 16th Divn to guard the crossings of the Somme from Bray (exclusive) down to Cérizy (4 miles below Bray), so as to prevent the enemy from cutting in from the south. The division was in position on the southern bank facing south at 9.30 P.M. Disaster, however, happened to the corps between Cléry and Sailly Saillisel, where the line of the 21st Divn (with the 116th Brigade attached) and of the 9th Division, as

<sup>1</sup> It was believed by the troops that the large number of cases of whisky left behind in the officers' canteen in Péronne was delaying the enemy.

can be seen on the map, was not continuous, while behind lay the devastated battle area of 1916. Roughly, the 64th and 62nd Bdes held a forward line ; the 110th Bde and South African Brigade were echeloned back ; the 27th Brigade stood forward again ; and the 26th, in two parts, was swung back on the left flank, with a two thousand yard gap between it and the right of the Third Army.

After a short bombardment with artillery and trench mortars, the enemy, between 8 and 8.30 A.M., attacked the forward positions of the 21st Divn and 9th Division in considerable force, and then swept onwards. The weight of the onslaught emerging from behind a curtain of mist first struck the 64th Bde ; and by about 9 A.M. the whole of it was withdrawing through the 116th Brigade, which was in trenches in support. A short stand was made on this position ; but heavy pressure on the right occasioned a further withdrawal to a line,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles in rear in a shallow valley in front of Hem, and through Hem Wood, which was reached about 11 A.M.

The retirement of troops at one place now had the usual result that the adjacent units, finding their flanks open, also retired. Thus between 9 and 10 A.M. the 62nd Bde and most of the 110th Bde dropped back in two stages to the high ground south-east of Maurepas north of the 64th. At this stage, the leading troops of the 35th Division (Major-General G. McK. Franks) began to appear on the scene, after a night in the train and a 17-mile march : first two battalions of the 105th Brigade and then two of the 106th.<sup>1</sup> They were joined by the Borden Battery of Canadian motor machine guns and the crews of the 4th Tank Battalion, who had salved their Lewis guns when compelled to abandon their tanks owing to lack of petrol and oil.

This increase of force was sufficient to turn the scale, and the repeated attempts of the Germans to push onwards were foiled. At 5 P.M., after holding off the enemy for five hours, the 21st Divn made a short retirement in the dusk to the previously selected line, Cury—Hardecourt. Major-General Franks, who had taken over command at 4 P.M., by which time most of the infantry had arrived, then ordered the infantry and engineers of the 21st Divn to be withdrawn and to concentrate at Suzanne, leaving the artillery in action.

<sup>1</sup> The battalions were only three companies strong, as one company of each had been left at the detraining station for work there.

On the left flank of the corps front, well in advance of the South African Brigade, the two battalions of the 27th Brigade and the pioneer battalion held the eastern face of St. Pierre Vaast Wood. They had nearly a mile of falling open ground in front of them which, in the mist, was no advantage. The third battalion was in echelon behind the right flank, and on the left, echeloned back in two portions, stood the 26th Brigade, which was extended as far as the corps and Army boundary ; beyond it came a gap. Neither brigade had received the order to hold on at all costs, and, in any case their isolated position and lack of reserves would render any protracted stand an act of suicide which offered no compensating benefit to the corps or to the operations as a whole. Warning of what might be expected had, in fact, been given during the night ; for Germans had crept into the gaps on either side of Br.-General W. D. Croft's command and cut communication both with the South African and the 26th Brigades. When therefore, about 8 A.M., the enemy emerged from the mist, the battalions after a short resistance, began an orderly retirement of about two miles over an open ridge to a position in front of Priez Farm, abreast of the South African Brigade. At 10 A.M. it withdrew a little further, to the next rise, on the east of the valley in which lies Combles. The 26th Brigade, already exposed on the left flank, withdrew about 10 A.M. as the 27th passed it, and then formed alongside of it. A further advance of the enemy necessitated yet another retirement of the two brigades between midday and 1 P.M. The 27th Brigade went back to the ridge on the west of Combles, and the 26th, echeloned to its left, lined up in front of Guillemont and Ginchy. During this operation—both infantry and artillery moving back as though at an old-fashioned field day, with mounted officers conveying orders—considerable losses were inflicted on the Germans ; but they continued to press steadily on. A further retirement south-west on Maricourt, was therefore ordered, and took place about 3 P.M.<sup>1</sup> At the same time a single battalion of the 35th Division, the 12/Highland L.I. (106th Brigade), stronger in numbers than the two Scottish brigades combined, came up from Hardecourt and occupied the Maurepas ridge, south of Combles. It was then de-

<sup>1</sup> Major-General C. A. Blacklock returned from leave and resumed command of the 9th Division, which had been carried on by Br.-General H. H. Tudor, the C.R.A., since the 21st.

cided, as originally arranged in case of retreat, to occupy the Courcey—Hardecourt position, and the 12/Highland L.I. fell back on to it, in touch on the right with the 105th Brigade (35th Division), whilst a battalion of Colonel Hunt's Force<sup>1</sup> was on its left. The 26th and 27th Bdes were withdrawn to a support position, but parts of all three battalions of the 26th, much split up by the day's fighting, were driven northwards off their proper line of retreat, and were finally collected at Albert, where they formed the nucleus of "Hadow's Force", under Lieut.-Colonel R. W. Hadow, 8/Black Watch.

Meanwhile, the South African Brigade had been annihilated. On the previous evening, Br.-General Tudor, who had visited all three brigades of the 9th Division, had given Br.-General Dawson, verbally, the corps order that the position was to be held "at all costs". About 9 A.M., the enemy, having already attacked the advanced portions of the 21st Divn and 9th Division, opened artillery and machine gun fire on the South Africans. Then in the mist, and later under cover of a smoke screen made by setting fire to the grass, German infantry gradually worked up to within a hundred or two hundred yards of the front line. By 11 A.M. the troops on either flank had disappeared, except small parties of the 14/Northumberland Fusiliers (P.) and 7/Leicestershire (110th Bde) which shared the fate of the South Africans. In the face of tremendous odds a fine defence was maintained; but towards 2 P.M. ammunition began to run short. To the south the advance of the 15/Cheshire (35th Division) had the effect of keeping the Germans occupied, but to the north they not only worked round the flank, but pushed on to Le Forest, a mile in rear of the left of the brigade. By 4 P.M. the South Africans and the men of the 110th Bde with them

<sup>1</sup> This force, under Lieut.-Colonel J. Hunt, 9/R. Dublin Fus., was formed on the nucleus of the VII. Corps Reinforcement Training Camp from units and details in the neighbourhood of Maricourt. It was organized into eight battalions:

- No. 1 39th Division details;
- " 2 24th Entrenching Battalion;
- " 3 Reinforcements;
- " 4 —do—
- " 5 VII. Corps school and one company R.E.;
- " 6 VII. Corps details from leave, etc.;
- " 7 17th Entrenching Battalion;
- " 8 Men from leave and courses.

The force contained a considerable proportion of recruits and men medically unfit. There was a shortage of Lewis guns, but this was partly made up by the guns and their crews from derelict tanks.

were nearly surrounded. German artillery fire continued heavy and incessant, and casualties reduced the line to a few isolated groups. About 4.30 P.M. an assault by three fresh enemy battalions came from the east and north-east, and the scattered defenders, numbering under a hundred men, were overwhelmed.<sup>1</sup> Br.-General Dawson himself was captured, fighting a machine gun to the last.<sup>2</sup> There was one consolation for the prisoners. They found the road east of Bouchavesnes blocked for miles by a double line of guns and transport, and learned that they had delayed all advance for over seven hours.

The 1st Cavalry Division, moving from the XIX. to the VII. Corps, had been assembled by midday at Cappy on the Somme, where it received orders from Lieut.-General Congreve, first to assist the right of the 21st Divn., and later to send a dismounted brigade to support the exposed left of the 9th Divn. A force under the command of Br.-General D'A. Legard was therefore made up of a composite regiment (about 300 strong) from each brigade and Y battery R.H.A.; it was decided that these troops should remain mounted. The force reached Maricourt at 4.20 P.M., the rest of the 1st Cavalry Division, after giving assistance to the 21st Divn., having gone back to Cérizy. The composite brigade was then ordered by the VII. Corps to fill the gap on the left of the corps, that is, to connect the Fifth and Third Armies. The position of the right of the Third Army (V. Corps) was unknown, but mounted patrols soon discovered that it was north of Bazentin le Grand, which showed that the gap—some five thousand yards in extent—was too wide to be filled completely. Br.-General Legard consequently formed a defensive flank extending round Montauban (now in the Third Army area). In the early hours of the 25th the rest of the gap was nearly closed by the arrival of the 51st Brigade (17th Division, Third Army), which came to occupy a position with its

<sup>1</sup> German accounts bear testimony to the very gallant defence made by the South Africans. The 199th *Division* was engaged here, and in the history of one of its regiments (114th) it is stated that "during the afternoon "the 357th and 237th *Reserve Regiments* captured Marrières Wood and the "hill at Priez Farm, in spite of the heroic and desperate defence of the "almost completely destroyed South African Brigade". Another regiment, of the 1st *Division*, which marched over the scene of the fight the next day, describes the trenches as full of dead from bayonet and hand-grenade wounds, "a proof that there had been bitter hand-to-hand fighting. A "South African Brigade had defended the hill to the last".

<sup>2</sup> This is recorded in the captured diary of a German officer, written up on the 26th March, and headed "Crater field near Le Forest".

right in front of Montauban, and its left behind Bazentin le Grand.

At night, therefore, the right wing of the VII. Corps held the line of the Somme from near Péronne westwards, facing north, whilst the left wing, facing east, extended from Cury on the Somme to Montauban. There were in support and reserve the 16th Divn, the greater part of Hunt's Force, the 9th Divn, and the greater part of the 1st Cavalry Division. Although most of the field artillery had had little training in manœuvre, they had continued to give the infantry active support, firing to the last possible moment, and retiring by echelons. Five field guns had been lost by shellfire during the day by the VII. Corps, and many artillery observation parties had been left behind during the retirement. The 35th Division artillery was still detraining and did not come up until late on the 25th, but twenty guns had been obtained by the 16th Divn from the Fifth Army Gun Park. The number of heavy guns on the corps front now totalled 118, excluding one battery which was south of the Somme with the 39th Division.

Lieut.-General Sir H. Lawrence, the C.G.S., visited Fifth Army headquarters during the afternoon; he also saw the commanders of the XIX. and VII. Corps, and General Fayolle, the last-named giving him particulars of the counter-attack, mentioned above, which the French were to make next morning. On leaving General Gough, after making himself thoroughly acquainted with the local situation, he proceeded to Third Army headquarters, where he was to meet the Commander-in-Chief at 8 p.m.

The final report for the day sent in by the Fifth Army at 9.35 p.m. gave therefore only the approximate front line held at dusk.

At 11.20 p.m. G.H.Q. issued orders<sup>1</sup> for the VII. Corps headquarters and all VII. Corps troops north of the Somme to be transferred to the Third Army, and for the troops of that corps south of the Somme (16th Divn and 39th Division) to be transferred to the XIX. Corps. The order took effect at 4 A.M. on the 25th.

Notification was also given that the 12th Division would arrive in an area west of Albert on the 25th, and would be allotted to the Third Army.

At 3 A.M. on the 25th, also by arrangement, the Fifth

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 28.

Army passed from the command of Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig to that of General Fayolle,<sup>1</sup> that is, the Somme now formed the boundary between their commands. This did not mean that General Gough ceased to exercise control; only that he received orders as to the conduct of operations from the Groupe d'Armées de Réserve (formed of the French First and Third Armies), instead of from G.H.Q.

General Fayolle's front line from the Oise to Feuillières, on the western bank of the Somme, had a total length of about 36 miles, of which the French troops, with some British units intermixed, held  $14\frac{1}{2}$  and the British  $21\frac{1}{2}$ . A great part of the Somme line was definitely lost; there was no intention of attempting to retake the more easterly part of it. It was, however, hoped that the combined French and British counter-attack which was to take place on the morning of the 25th would re-establish the line as far south as the Ingou, which joins the Somme between Voyennes and Béthencourt, the purpose being to link up this line with the position already held behind the Canal du Nord.

The Fifth Army received little assistance from tanks on the 24th, practically all of them having been hit, incapacitated by mechanical trouble, or abandoned for want of petrol. The half-dozen machines of the 1st, 4th and 5th Battalions, which remained, were with the VII. Corps and assisted to cover the last stages of the retirement from Maurepas and Hardecourt on Maricourt. The crews of the abandoned tanks, as already mentioned, formed detachments with their Lewis guns and acted with the infantry.

Very little information was obtained from the air, as it was difficult for the airmen to distinguish friend from foe.

There was a marked increase in air fighting, and low-flying aeroplanes attacked German troops massing for advance, but, although they undoubtedly caused casualties and temporary halts, as enemy accounts admit, they could not influence the general result. The infantry saw little of air action except when enemy planes swooped down upon them. Officers, ignorant of the fighting taking place over the German lines, unkindly remarked that they had observed nothing of the British air force on this day except abandoned aerodromes.

<sup>1</sup> F.O.A. vi. (i), p. 282, says this took place at 11 P.M. on the 23rd. But the transfer was not notified by G.H.Q. to the Fifth Army until 11.20 P.M. on the 24th.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

24TH MARCH 1918 (*concluded*)

#### THIRD ARMY

(Map 9 ; Sketches 6, 17)

**Map 9.** On the 24th March, the V. Corps, the right corps of the Third Army, finally escaped from the grave perils with which it had been threatened as the result of clinging too long to the Flesquières Salient. The Germans, without attacking that salient in front, had planned to "pinch it out" by operations against its shoulders. Fortunately, the stout resistance offered by the VII. Corps (Fifth Army) to the south of the salient, and by the IV. Corps, to the north, had slackened the speed of the German advance, giving Lieut.-General Sir E. A. Fanshawe time to draw back his divisions. By lingering in the Salient, however, he had failed to keep touch with the Fifth Army, although the duty of maintaining contact between the Third and Fifth Armies had, by G.H.Q. orders, been assigned to the former, and consequently devolved upon his corps. Even on the morning of the 24th, a good portion of it, the 68rd Division and 2nd Divn, was still in a small, tambour-shaped salient around Bertincourt, projecting some four thousand yards in front of the general line. As a result there was a gap of over two thousand yards between the Army boundary, which ran through Sailly Saillisel, where the right of the V. Corps should have been, and its actual position.

At 12.40 A.M. Third Army headquarters reiterated the orders, issued at 7.20 P.M. on the previous evening by direction of G.H.Q. ; these made the V. Corps responsible for the line as far south as Government Farm, just south-east of Sailly Saillisel. On the 28th Br.-General Tudor,

commanding the 9th Divn (the left of the Fifth Army), had endeavoured to keep touch with the Third Army by sending his 26th Bde into the Third Army area ; but at 1.25 A.M. on the 24th he informed the 47th Divn of the V. Corps, next to him, that he was now compelled to recall that brigade into his own area.

General Byng had not provided any additional troops to help the V. Corps to keep touch with its neighbour ; so Lieut.-General Fanshawe, on hearing of the situation from the 47th Divn, directed Major-General Gorringe to take immediate steps to occupy the ground between Sailly and Le Mesnil and so gain touch with the 9th Divn. Later, at 5 A.M., as the 47th Divn (with which the 99th Bde still remained) could not cover so much frontage without reinforcements, he ordered the 51st Brigade (17th Division), then in reserve behind Villers au Flos, to move southwards some three miles to fill the gap, under the orders of the 47th Divn. This order was cancelled an hour later, as the whereabouts of the 47th Divn were not known, and the 51st Brigade was then directed to fill the gap between Sailly and Rocquigny and to gain touch with the left of the 9th Divn. The brigade marched at 6.45 A.M. and in spite of the obscurity of the situation and difficulties of movement in the devastated area, began to arrive in position on the right of the 47th Divn soon after 8 A.M. It was, as will be seen, of great assistance in covering the retirement of the division. Meanwhile it succeeded in establishing touch with the Fifth Army ; but this contact was once more lost owing to the retirement of the 9th Divn.

The IV. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir G. M. Harper) was in no very happy position. It still held the Green Line, except around Mory where fighting had gone on all night ; but the line near the village consisted of no more than an old German trench with the wire, naturally, on the wrong side, while the support position, the so-called Red Line, had been little more than marked out. The VI. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir J. A. L. Haldane), holding on its right the Sensée Switch between the Green Line and the Battle Zone, still maintained a good position in the rear portion of the Battle Zone.

#### *V. Corps*

During the night, the 63rd Division (Major-General W. G. Lawrie) in the Salient, and to a less degree the 2nd

Divn (Major-General C. E. Pereira), had suffered considerably from artillery and machine-gun fire at short range ; there had also been a good deal of firing near Bus and Ytres, on the southern side of the Salient. In their endeavour to cover the large engineer and ammunition dumps near the latter place which were presently set on fire, the troops found themselves between the enemy and a mass of blazing stores and exploding shells. Towards 5 A.M. a heavy barrage came down on the southern side, followed shortly afterwards by a fierce infantry attack. At this time telephone communication from the 63rd Division (head quarters at Lesboeufs) to its brigades and to corps headquarters (at Méaulte, south-east of Albert) was still intact, although it was soon to fail for the rest of the day. Reports received by this means indicated that the Germans were making a last desperate effort to catch the troops in the Salient. At 6.15 A.M., therefore, Lieut.-General Fanshawe, having no reinforcements to send, issued orders by telephone for the withdrawal of the 63rd Division and 2nd Divn, through the 17th Division, then holding the support line ; the move to begin at 8.45 A.M. The last named division, with the 51st Brigade returned to it, was then to be responsible for the front line except a small portion on the left assigned to the 2nd Divn ; the 47th Divn would remain in support of the right flank ; the 63rd Division would fall back behind Barastre and reorganize ; and any portion of the 2nd Divn not required to hold the new position would be withdrawn to Villers au Flos.

The orders for the retirement reached the front battalions of the 188th Brigade, the left of the 63rd Division, between 8 and 9 A.M., but the units of the other brigades never received them. They conformed, however, to the movement of the 188th as soon as it was observed, for the mist by that time had entirely cleared away. The withdrawal was effected in good order, covered by the 17th Division artillery and every machine gun which could be put into position to assist the battalions on the right. Although it had to be carried out across perfectly open downland, with the enemy infantry on the right flank only eight hundred yards or less distant, there was practically no loss, as the Germans fired high and did not close.<sup>1</sup> There was no enemy artillery

<sup>1</sup> The Germans erroneously thought that their fire was effective. The following account appears in "Res. Regt. No. 248", which formed part of *54th Reserve Division, XXXIX. Reserve Corps, Second Army* :

"About 10 A.M. the English appeared in extended order, moving north-

fire ; in fact, the almost complete absence of hostile shelling was very noticeable in the early hours of the 24th and on subsequent days, as the German infantry and machine guns in following up entirely outpaced their artillery.

By 11 A.M. the 63rd Division had reached the Red Line, but after a short pause for rest moved back to the sugar factory north of Le Transloy,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles from its morning position.

The 2nd Divn (5th and 6th Bdes) had more difficulty in getting clear. In the first place, there was a gap between its two brigades ; this had been caused by the movements of a party of the 19th Division, which, after having gone astray, had filled the gap during the night but early in the morning had marched off to rejoin its brigade. Secondly, when the telephone lines from the 5th Bde were cut, its battalions were left with the general impression that they were to retire to the east of Rocquigny, instead of south-east of Haplincourt, nearly 3,000 yards to the north. Thus, although the 5th Bde was driven a little north-westwards during the move owing to enemy pressure, the gap between it and the 6th Bde was increased. Nevertheless, about 10 A.M., the 5th Bde, under shell fire against its left flank from the direction of Vélu and Lebucquièvre, managed to reach what the battalions imagined to be their new position, in front of the Red Line, though not without many casualties. They had, in fact, been saved by the 8th Tank Battalion on the right, which kept off any German infantry disposed to follow.

As the 6th Bde stood further west it was to begin its retirement later, but it was struck by a heavy barrage and then, before it could move off, by a very violent infantry

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" westwards across the high ground lying north-east of Bus and north of Ytres. The leading lines were immediately fired upon by the companies " and machine guns established north of the former village. . . . Our " companies and machine guns at a range of 800 metres poured such " enfilade fire into the masses following one after another that the greater " part of them was killed or wounded."

Yet they nearly all arrived safe and sound at Beaulencourt.

" Res. Regt. No. 52 ", 107th Division also of the XXXIX. Reserve Corps, gives the following version of the same incident. This regiment was near Bus.

" Somewhere to our right the enemy had been enveloped. He could no longer retire straight to the rear, for he was trying to get away by moving " to the left, and had to cross our front from right to left, 600 metres from " us without any cover at all. In feverish haste, two heavy and three light " Belgian machine guns were hoisted on to the parapet. And then he was " pursued by our fire for  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours."

attack between 9.30 and 10 A.M. The Germans emerging from Vélu Wood and Lebucquière advanced over the open, but such devastating machine-gun fire was poured into them that they broke and fell back in confusion. The retirement then proceeded. A little further north the 56th Brigade (19th Division) was forced to give ground, but this was recovered by a counter-attack in which part of the 6th Bde participated; so here also the enemy fell back. At 12.40 P.M. he attacked the new position of the 2nd Divn, backed up by a strong barrage of trench mortars and penetrated into the gap between the 5th and 6th Bdes. Both had to retire about 2 P.M. and fell back fighting to the Red Line.<sup>1</sup> The divisional machine guns remained to the last, inflicting heavy casualties, but losing 29 guns.

On hearing from the 2nd Divn of its retirement, Major-General G. D. Jeffreys ordered the 56th and 58th Brigades of the 19th Division of the IV. Corps, which were on its left, to fall back.

Whilst the events described above had been taking place in the centre and left of the V. Corps, the situation of the right flank, which had been in danger throughout the operations, had become critical. Not only had the gap between the VII. Corps (Fifth Army) and the V. Corps been left open, but, as we have seen, a powerful attack which began about 8 A.M. had carried away the northernmost troops of the VII. Corps, that is, the 26th and 27th Bdes of the 9th Divn. Thus, by 10 A.M. these brigades were back near Combles and the gap between the Fifth and Third Armies had increased to over four miles. As early as 6.35 A.M. large numbers of Germans had been detected working westwards up the valley which runs from Etricourt on the Tortille towards Le Mesnil, a little to the south of the 47th Divn front line.<sup>2</sup> About 8.30 A.M. they had entered the village and south of it were pressing on towards Sailly Saillisel, which they reached about 11 A.M.

Shortly after 8 A.M. the three infantry brigadiers of the 47th Divn met to discuss the course to be taken in case a retirement should become necessary. In such an

<sup>1</sup> The Red Line was so poorly marked that numbers of men of the 2nd Divn and 17th and 19th Divisions passed over it, and as no mounted officers had their chargers, it was difficult to shepherd the men until a few horses had been borrowed from the artillery.

<sup>2</sup> The 47th Divn had fragments of five battalions in the front line, two in echelon behind the right flank north of Sailly Saillisel and those of the 142nd Bde and the 99th Bde (2nd Divn) in support. The 51st Brigade (17th Division) was moving to join it.

event they decided first to make a stand near Le Transloy and then to retire westwards. The pressure on the front, however, was not great, for the Germans streamed past the right flank leaving troops to hold in position the 47th Divn and the 51st Brigade (17th Division), which was beginning to come up on the refused inner flank of the 47th south of Le Transloy. So far did the Germans advance towards Le Transloy that the 51st Brigade was soon compelled to swing its right back some five hundred yards to avoid being enfiladed.

About 10.30 A.M. the brigades of the 47th Divn received an instruction from Major-General Gorringe that if retreat became necessary, in order to get touch with the Fifth Army the movement should be in a general south-westerly direction towards Albert, via Lesboeufs, Ginchy and Longueval; or, if that route were impossible, by a detour to the north past Gueudecourt, a village directly west of Le Transloy.<sup>1</sup>

By this time General Byng had received information of the retirement of the 9th Divn to Combles, and at 11.50 A.M. he issued orders to the V. Corps to restore the situation at Sailly Saillisel; should it prove impossible to hold that village, then the line Frégicourt—Le Transloy, behind it, across the Army boundary, was to be safeguarded. He sent no reinforcements for the purpose. The orders were the first definite news which reached Lieut.-General Fanshawe to show that the Germans had in fact driven a wedge between the Fifth and Third Armies; but he could do no more than send urgent orders for the 47th Divn (whose headquarters were in the centre of where Longueval had stood and on the line of retirement of the division), to collect all available troops and block the line between Combles and Sailly Saillisel, both of which places were by now in the enemy's hands. At the same time he reminded the commander of the 47th Divn of his duty to keep touch with the Fifth Army.

In anticipation of the German movements, Major-General Gorringe had already sent two companies of the divisional engineers and the pioneer battalion to a position between Ginchy and Lesboeufs,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles to the west of the line ordered by the V. Corps. This action he now reported, pointing out that no more troops could be spared without thinning his main line. In fact, at this very

<sup>1</sup> This instruction does not appear to have reached the 140th Bde, whose records give Combles as the direction.

moment, about noon, the Germans were closing in on the 47th Divn, 17th Division and 2nd Divn; having brought up four guns to the ridge immediately west of Ytres, they were enfilading the line of the 17th Division and knocking out the machine guns one after the other, whilst aeroplanes flew low and fired on the infantry. By 2.30 p.m., the 5th and 6th Bdes, unable to maintain their position on the Red Line, were in accordance with their divisional orders falling back westward: the 50th Brigade next on the south, having covered the retirement of the 63rd Division, proceeded to do likewise, towards Gueudecourt. About the same moment the V. Corps telephoned to the 17th Division that the Germans had occupied Combles and Morval, and were moving on Lesboeufs: the 17th Division was therefore to extricate itself at once and occupy the line Montauban—Bazentin le Grand nearly seven miles away to the south-west. There was obvious need for haste; for immediately after receipt of the above order, the 51st Brigade, on the refused right flank, reported that it was being driven back on Le Transloy by Germans advancing due north. The direct line of retirement of the 17th Division was therefore cut.

At 3.40 p.m. Major-General Robertson issued his orders for retirement, directing his brigades to move in succession, so as to take up, one after the other, a series of defensive positions facing south, behind which the remainder could pass in security. Finally, whilst the divisional engineers covered the roads between Flers and Gueudecourt, the division was to form up on the line Bazentin le Grand—Martinpuich. The V. Corps message had indicated the line Montauban—Bazentin le Grand, but there seemed little hope of reaching Montauban whilst the Germans were pushing forward against the right flank.

Almost simultaneously with the issue of the above orders, at 3.45 p.m., General Byng, who seems to have come to the same conclusion as Major-General Robertson, gave orders, first by telephone and then in writing, that, in consequence of the enemy having broken through to Combles, Morval and Lesboeufs, the V. and IV. Corps should re-establish the right flank on the approximate line Bazentin—Martinpuich—Le Sars—Grévillers—Sapignies. Thus a wide swing back of the right wing of the Third Army was at last decided upon. If this had been ordered one or two days earlier it might have saved much anxiety as regards the junction between the Fifth and Third

Armies. It now brought about a somewhat hurried and confused movement on the southern wing which was threatened by the enemy.

During the afternoon Major-General J. H. Davidson, of the General Staff G.H.Q., visited Third Army headquarters at Beauquesne to discuss the general situation. General Byng impressed on him the exhaustion of the men and the desirability, should a retirement become necessary, of manning the new line with fresh troops, so that those who had been fighting for four days could be given some rest. But G.H.Q. had no fresh troops available. The retirement to the new line, as General Byng pointed out, was forced on the Third Army by the progress of the enemy against its right flank ; the front, he said, would thereby be straightened, but the movement involved the abandonment of Bapaume, from which roads radiated in all directions, and particularly of the Péronne—Bapaume—Arras road, which linked the right and left of the Army.

Sir Douglas Haig, who about 8 P.M. visited Third Army headquarters—where the C.G.S., Lieut.-General Lawrence, reported to him as previously arranged, the result of his talk with General Gough— instructed General Byng at all costs to cling with his left to the First Army near Arras, and if forced to give ground to do so by drawing back his right to the old British trench system, which extended from Arras southward to Ransart, and along the ancient defence line. By thinning the line of the First and Second Armies, he added, he hoped to concentrate a reserve behind Arras to strike south-westward if the enemy penetrated towards Amiens.

The V. Corps orders, issued at 4.30 P.M. in consequence of General Byng's 3.45 P.M. message, do not appear to have been communicated at once to the 17th Division, which was already in possession of orders to retire ; but the 63rd Division and 2nd Divn received them by hand about 5.30 P.M. Br.-General G. F. Boyd, the senior General Staff Officer of the V. Corps, took them personally to the 47th Divn, whose headquarters were six miles away at Longueval. The real difficulty, however, was for the divisions to pass on the orders ; for, in spite of the most strenuous efforts of the Signal service, line communication was for the rest of the day hopelessly interrupted. The divisions, therefore, sent out staff officers and messengers to find or intercept the brigadiers ; and so it happened that some brigades never received orders at all.

The Army and corps orders were useful only as regards the direction of the retirement, for movement had been begun under pressure of the enemy before they reached divisional headquarters, and hours before the brigades and battalions in the front line could possibly receive them.

About 2.30 P.M. the enemy was not only moving westward to attack what remained of the front line, but he had penetrated between the VII. and V. Corps and reached Sailly Saillisel, Lesboeufs and Ginchy. Detachments, described as strong patrols accompanied by artillery, and using signal lights to indicate targets to guns in rear, were in some cases found marching parallel with the retiring brigades, and were also pushing northward from the above named villages against the flank of the Third Army. Fortunately, the German artillery seems to have directed its fire against the sites of former villages and cross roads chiefly by the map, and the troops, by avoiding these places, suffered less than might have been expected. The general movements only can be described : the state of confusion of friend and foe drifting westward during the afternoon and evening of a March day over an area devastated by the Somme battle of 1916 and then by the deliberate destructions of the German retirement of March 1917,<sup>1</sup> may perhaps be imagined. Some units were lucky enough to come upon dumps of food, others were not, and everywhere there was a lack of water.

On the left, the 2nd Divn (5th and 6th Bdes), which had been forced to leave the Red Line soon after reaching it at 2 P.M., had retired slowly westward, accompanied by the pioneer battalion and machine-gun companies, for a distance of two miles to Beaulencourt. This place was reached at 4.30 P.M., and here the battalions dug in, prolonging the line already held by troops of the IV. Corps southwards towards Le Transloy. The corps order for retirement reached the brigades at 6.30 P.M.; but the brigadiers having already realized the imminent threat of encirclement from the south had decided, about 6 P.M., to continue the march westwards. Although very tired, the men moved off steadily. Soon they lost on the southern flank the protection of the tanks, which, running out of petrol, had to be abandoned. Reduced to the strength of about one thousand men, the brigades and machine-gun battalion were 2½ miles further on, near Ligny Thilloy,

<sup>1</sup> In this area, although the main roads had been repaired, villages were merely names without the vestige of a building.

when, about 7.15 P.M., they received the divisional orders to occupy the line Eaucourt l'Abbaye—Ligny Thilloy, which had already been partly organized by the divisional engineers. Here the 99th Bde rejoined about 8.30 P.M.<sup>1</sup>

In the 17th Division, the 50th Brigade began to retire from the Red Line about the same time as the 5th and 6th Bdes. Having been intercepted by the divisional staff at Beaulencourt, it did not form a defensive flank as originally ordered, but proceeded on to Gueudecourt, which it reached about 5.30 P.M. The Flers—Gueudecourt line was still held by the 17th Division engineers, but the field companies R.E. of the 2nd Divn went back to help organize the new line of the 5th and 6th Bdes. The 50th Brigade (Br.-General C. Yatman) should then have proceeded via Ginchy to Bazentin le Grand, but, seeing that the right flank was seriously threatened and being short of ammunition, the brigade turned off north-westwards from Ginchy and reached Flers about 7.30 P.M.

At Flers Br.-General Yatman met Br.-General Eden of the 52nd Brigade, whose battalions had clung to their position near Rocquigny until 3 P.M. At that hour seeing the gradual retirement of the troops on either flank Br.-General Eden, who had received no orders, had decided to withdraw his battalions gradually to the sugar factory north of Le Transloy, where the 63rd Division still remained. Learning that it was about to make a further retirement, Br.-General Eden, at 4.5 P.M., gave instructions to his brigade to continue on to Gueudecourt and eventually to Courcelette. Riding over towards the troops moving through Beaulencourt he met the brigade-major of the 51st Brigade, who communicated the divisional orders to him. He then went back to head off his own troops towards

<sup>1</sup> The greater part of the 99th Bde, detached under the 47th Divn, had been assembled at Gueudecourt soon after 6 A.M. Here it eventually dug in, facing south; the 1/K.R.R.C. remained with the 63rd Division near Bus, though no orders reached it, and conformed to its retirement. The 99th Bde had received various orders—to occupy Lesboeufs, advance on Morval etc.—which it was impossible to execute. At 4.15 P.M. Br.-General R. Barnett Barker heard of the retirement of the 63rd and 17th Divisions, and finally about 6 P.M. (just before he and the brigade-major were killed in Gueudecourt by a shell) decided to follow suit, as the brigade had both flanks exposed. Lieut.-Colonel E. A. Winter (23/Royal Fusiliers) then took command and led the brigade back to Eaucourt l'Abbaye in the new line, four men voluntarily carrying Br.-General Barker's body, lest it should fall into the hands of the Germans. Here the 1/K.R.R.C. rejoined about 8.30 P.M., utterly exhausted, and with the 10/Duke of Cornwall's L.I. (P.)—swollen to over twelve hundred men by collecting stragglers—became the reserve of the division.

Flers, where the brigade was to take a flank position so as to cover the retirement of the 51st Brigade. With some difficulty this was accomplished, and when the 50th Brigade arrived in Flers at 7.30 P.M. the 52nd Brigade was already in position on the north-eastern edge of where Flers had once stood.

The enemy was reported in Morval and Lesboeufs and his patrols had actually pressed against Flers; so it was decided at a consultation between the two brigadiers that both brigades should march for Martinpuich making a detour northwards by Eaucourt l'Abbaye. At 9.30 P.M. they moved off, the 50th Brigade leading; but the men were so tired that they needed two hours to reach Eaucourt l'Abbaye, a mile and a half away.

From the 99th Bde which was found established there it was learnt that, according to the information in an order of the 2nd Divn, the 17th Division was to prolong the right along the road from Eaucourt l'Abbaye south-westwards towards High Wood. To this line the two brigades proceeded, and settled down, the 50th on the left and the 52nd on the right. About 3 A.M. on the 25th, immediately after the latter had got into place, Br-General Eden found that the 188th Brigade (63rd Division) was moving forward to occupy the very ground on which the 52nd Brigade stood. He therefore decided to withdraw behind the line to Martinpuich,  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles away, where he had heard the 51st Brigade had arrived. Finding no trace of it there at 6 A.M., he led his men a little further, to Courcelette. Here, to men who had had no water or rations since the 23rd, an artillery ration dump offered a welcome opportunity for breakfast.

The 51st Brigade had been for a time at Martinpuich, but had later moved and was in fact near Montauban. Detached on the right of the V. Corps with the 47th Divn, it had duly received its own divisional orders to retire after being forced back northwards on Le Transloy. It moved towards Gueudecourt and then westwards across country south of the route of the 50th and 52nd Brigades to Martinpuich, where it arrived, ahead of its sister brigades, about midnight. At 1.25 A.M., Major-General Robertson, believing that all his brigades would soon be collected at Martinpuich, and that, in accordance with the corps orders of 2.30 P.M., a further effort should be made to gain touch with the VII. Corps (Fifth Army), sent out an order that a movement southwards must be made at 4 A.M. to reach the line

Montauban—Bazentin le Grand. The order reached only the 51st Brigade, which accordingly marched off and arrived between Montauban and Bazentin, where after dawn it discovered Legard's dismounted cavalry away on the right. Br.-General C. E. Bond also found that the right of the 47th Divn was around Bazentin le Petit, and therefore swung back his left to gain touch with it; but his brigade was too weak in numbers to close the gap entirely. Thus it was that on the morning of the 25th, the 51st Brigade was still absent from the main body of the 17th Division.

The movements of the 63rd Division must now be traced. In consequence of the beginning of the retirement of the 2nd Divn and of the 50th Brigade westward, together with the forcing of the 47th Divn northward on Le Transloy, Major-General Lawrie, soon after 2.30 P.M., had ordered the retirement of the 63rd Division westward from Le Transloy towards the line Bazentin le Petit—Martinpuch, in three parallel columns. They were shelled and machine-gunned at times by Germans near Lesboeufs, but by 5 P.M. had arrived in the neighbourhood of High Wood. Soon afterwards Major-General Lawrie managed to communicate with V. Corps headquarters, through the medium of 2nd Divn headquarters by then established in Destremont Farm (a mile north of Martinpuich). He now learnt of the 4.30 P.M. orders defining the line to be occupied, also that his division was to hold the ground from High Wood to Eaucourt l'Abbaye. By good fortune, one column consisting of the 189th Brigade, with the 248th Field Company R.E. and some batteries, was almost on this position, so that by 7 P.M. it was moving to occupy it. It happened that one of the many large German patrols which had been thrusting forward all day had concealed itself among the stumps of High Wood, only a short distance away; so a sharp fight took place in the dark, with some loss of horses among the gun teams. By 9 P.M., however, the 189th Brigade had established itself on a line from south-east of High Wood to a point abreast of, but east of Martinpuich. The 188th Brigade, meantime, had moved to Martinpuich; it had therefore to be brought back, but not until after it had made a good meal at the ration dumps found in an abandoned Chinese labour camp. It did not arrive north of the 189th to complete the line until nearly 1 A.M. on the 25th. Then, as we have seen, it took the place of the 52nd Brigade; but touch with the 50th Brigade to the north was not established until daylight.

The 190th Brigade went into reserve at Courcelette two miles to the west.

Soon after 4 P.M. Major-General Gorringe (47th Divn) received verbally from the Brigadier-General, General Staff, the corps order to fall back to Bazentin le Grand—High Wood. The O.C. Signal Company, who carried the message to the brigades, as all his men were worn out, succeeded, after long delay, in reaching the 140th and 141st Bdes, but then fell into the hands of an enemy patrol. The orders, as happened elsewhere, had been anticipated by events, while the movements of the division were accelerated by the fact that it had operated near High Wood and the Butte de Warlencourt in 1916, and many of its officers and men knew the ground. Learning that the Germans were in Lesboeufs, to its right rear, the 142nd Bde, which was in support south of Le Transloy, began about 2.30 P.M. to fall back slowly across country on Gueudecourt; short of the village, some three hours later, Br.-General V. T. Bailey met the brigadiers, Kennedy and Mildren, of the 140th and 141st Bdes.

These troops, the right of the 47th Divn, had been driven back from the Red Line about the same time as the 51st Brigade further north, and had fallen back first to Le Transloy and then to Gueudecourt, to take position there alongside the 142nd Bde, as had been previously arranged. By 4.30 P.M. of that fine and sunny afternoon their staffs could see troops to the north retiring, as if the whole corps was moving westwards in small parties. The reason for this was not apparent, as the German advance had already slowed down. The brigade-major of the 140th Bde, riding towards these parties, learnt from the G.S.O. 1 of the 63rd Division that they were the rear guards of that division, which was retiring on Martinpuich, where the 17th Division had halted. In the absence of orders, the three brigadiers decided to conform to the retirement of the 63rd Division and make for Bazentin le Grand by a circuitous route to the north in order to avoid the Germans, who, by now, were known to be nearing Flers.

The 142nd Bde then continued the march across country independently by battalions and companies, but, on nearing Flers, a German patrol suddenly appeared fifty yards off and fired on the brigade staff, the brigade-major being killed and Br.-General Bailey wounded in both legs and taken prisoner. The brigade eventually reached divisional

headquarters, which were now in Contalmaison, where it was retained in reserve.

The 141st and 140th Bdes gradually moved off, following the 142nd, and about 6 P.M. received the divisional order to fall back to the line Bazentin le Grand—High Wood, a move that they were already carrying out. The rear guard of the 140th remained east of Gueudecourt until Germans were seen advancing east from, and south of Le Transloy. Then the various columns of the two brigades, keeping to the north of Flers, and moving via Eaucourt l'Abbaye, made for Martainpuich. Reduced to a few hundred men, they eventually reached Bazentin le Petit by the light of a blazing ammunition dump in Pozières. Contact having been re-established with divisional headquarters, it was learnt that High Wood was occupied by the 63rd Division; so the order to make for it was cancelled, and the remnants of the two brigades remained around Bazentin le Petit.

This night the spirit of the men, for once, was somewhat shaken; they had been under the belief that the retreat was "according to plan", and that when the devastated area had been crossed, they would pass through fresh troops already in position—the names of the divisions coming up for the purpose had actually been mentioned. Now they found themselves still in the front line. Some began to wonder if all was as well as had been represented.

The V. Corps had certainly shaken off pursuit and reached a new line; but there were gaps all along its front; neither had touch been established with the Fifth Army on the right, nor with the IV. Corps on the left. This isolation, the weakness of all units, their confusion and dispersion often in scattered groups which it was impossible to disentangle during the night, and the extreme fatigue of the men, all combined to increase the danger of the situation. Most of the artillery had come back. Of the heavies, only one gun was lost and one damaged. The field artillery in general had retired by brigades leaving one battery to cover the withdrawal of the rear guard. Over the devastated area movement was difficult, and, having to march early and with caution, the guns during this day could not render all the assistance in defence which the infantry expected of them. Owing to the congestion of traffic, there were frequent halts; the batteries came under fire of German patrols and had losses in guns and gun teams. Of these casualties there is no specific record.

except that three guns of the 19th Division, attached to the 63rd, marched into a *cul-de-sac* among old trenches, shell craters and barbed wire, where they were caught and destroyed.

The enemy, fortunately, experienced exactly the same difficulties as to ground and the necessity for taking precautions. British prisoners subsequently reported that the failure of the Germans to advance more rapidly was mainly due to nerves—they were in constant fear of falling into traps; there was also hopeless congestion of traffic—long columns of infantry, guns and transport were continually being held up; there was uncertainty of direction—one staff officer actually asked a prisoner where he was; and, lastly, complete breakdown of supply arrangements.

#### *IV. Corps*

The IV. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir G. M. Harper) passed a quiet night, except for occasional outbursts of heavy gun fire. It continued undisturbed until between 5 and 7.30 A.M., when a barrage was put down on the whole corps front to prevent the German infantry from attacking: the artillery was not slow to retaliate. Still holding the Green Line, well sited on fairly level ground, with the Red Line as supporting line, and in close touch with the corps on either side, the position of the IV. Corps, but for the fatigue of the troops, seemed moderately secure. A defensive flank had already been formed on the left towards Mory, while, about 9 A.M., in view of the unfounded rumour that the V. Corps was retiring, another was organized on the right. The 19th Division, with the 51st Divn behind it, was on this flank, the 41st Division (with the 7th Brigade of the 25th) on the left: the remaining infantry of the 25th Division was in reserve behind the left. The 6th Divn (less its artillery), entrenched in front of Achiet le Petit, was beginning to leave the corps for rest, the remnants of its fighting troops in the line<sup>1</sup> being pulled out as circumstances would permit. Considerable massing of Germans near Beugny, opposite the centre of the 19th Division front, was reported at an early hour. Actually the heavy fighting of the morning took place on the flanks of the IV. Corps: first at Mory from 5 A.M. onwards, where the 75th Brigade (25th Division) was warned to

<sup>1</sup> The 18th Bde (Br.-General G. S. G. Craufurd), for instance, numbered 11 officers and 80 other ranks.

strengthen that flank, and a little later on the right, where, as already mentioned, about 10 A.M., the 56th Brigade (19th Division) became involved in the infantry attack which had fallen on the left of the V. Corps. Here the 9/Cheshire was forced back slightly, but recovered a lost trench to find it so full of dead and wounded Germans that there was no room to stand in it. Another attack was made on the 56th Brigade between 11 A.M. and noon, but was repulsed by intense rifle and machine-gun fire. Constant reports were received during the morning from forward observing officers of large concentrations all along the front : again near Beugny, and particularly in the valley running south from Vaulx Vraucourt, which consequently was shelled by sixteen field and three heavy batteries. But, although enemy bombardment was heavy on the 19th Division front, no infantry attack followed.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the commanders of the 19th and 41st Divisions, Major-Generals G. D. Jeffreys and Sir S. Lawford, made preliminary arrangements for a retirement should it be necessary.

Lieut.-General Harper's principal care was to assemble a reserve. At 10 A.M. he ordered the 25th Division, less its artillery, still in action, but including the 7th Brigade, to concentrate behind the left of the corps in the Favreuil—Sapignies—Bihucourt area. Attempts had already been made by the 123rd Bde, itself very weak, to release what remained of the 7th Brigade, and one battalion had been extricated by the 18/K.R.R.C. of the 122nd. Orders were now sent to continue these attempts, but the worn battalions of the 123rd Bde had already been withdrawn to recuperate, and little could be done. Every effort also was made to collect the machine-gun companies on reserve positions, ready to rejoin their own divisions.

The field artillery of the corps was organized in two large groups, one south and the other north of the Bapaume—Cambrai road.<sup>2</sup> A heavy brigade was attached to each

<sup>1</sup> A heavy bombardment preparatory to attack was ordered, but the British artillery fire just mentioned seems to have put the Germans in fear of a counter-attack, and defensive measures were ordered, no serious advance taking place until after 5 P.M. ("Guard Res. Regt. No. 2").

<sup>2</sup> Right Group (Br.-General L. C. L. Oldfield, C.R.A. 51st Divn) :

255th, 256th Bdes (51st Divn).

112th Bde (25th Division).

235th Bde (47th Divn).

104th and 298rd Army Brigades.

Left Group (Br.-General A. S. Cotton, C.R.A. 41st Division, who took over from Br.-General E. F. Delaforce, C.R.A. 6th Divn at 10.40 A.M.) :

group, the remaining four heavy brigades being retained under corps orders during the early part of the day.

Soon after midday it could be seen from the Red Line that the 2nd Divn (V. Corps) was fighting desperately, and it grew very clear that the 56th Brigade and 58th Bde, in the front line of the 19th Division, astride the Bapaume—Cambrai road, would soon have to go. The right group of the artillery therefore began to move back. The infantry brigadiers had been warned confidentially that the first stage of the retirement would be through the 57th Brigade to the eastern outskirts of Bapaume, and that the first troops of the 41st Division were to retire by three stages to the Red Line north of the town.

About 2 P.M., as soon as the retirement of the 2nd Divn was observed, the 56th Brigade and 58th Bde began to withdraw. The actual orders for the movement, issued by divisional headquarters at Grévillers (where also were those of the 41st Division), and based on information received from the 2nd Divn, did not arrive until 3.30 P.M. Already enfiladed on both flanks, the 56th Brigade and 58th Bde had some difficulty in getting clear; but thanks to a stand made in a slight dip in the open fields near the Red Line, to frequent small counter-attacks, and to the assistance of the artillery and troops in the Red Line they reached their appointed place eastwards of Bapaume, where, from 4 P.M. onwards, reorganization was taken in hand.

The 57th Brigade (north of the Bapaume—Cambrai road) was left in the Red Line under the orders of the 51st Divn (IV. Corps), whose 153rd Bde was next to it south of the road.

Further effects of the retirement of the V. Corps were soon to be felt. Just after 3 P.M. the staffs of the 19th and 41st Divisions in Grévillers learnt that the V. Corps was evacuating the Red Line and realized that the 19th Division must follow suit. Major-General Lawford at once spoke by telephone to corps headquarters; but even as he was discussing the situation with Lieut.-General Harper, further

187th, 190th Brigades (41st Division).

1 composite brigade made up of all that was left of the 6th Divn artillery.

XCIII. Army Brigade.

2 composite brigades made up of two batteries each of the 110th Brigade (25th Division) and two batteries each of the 286th Brigade (47th Divn).

news came to the effect that the Germans had broken into the Green Line near Beugny from the south, were thrusting forward down the Bapaume—Cambrai road, and were approaching Frémicourt between the Green and Red Lines. It was now clear that the 41st Division, like the 19th, must retire. Lieut.-General Harper therefore authorized Major-General Lawford to swing back the right of his division from the Green Line to keep touch with the 19th. The order reached the 7th Brigade and 123rd Bde at 4 P.M., when the German attack had already begun. Although suffering heavy casualties from rifle and machine-gun fire the battalions in the front line extricated themselves and carried out the retirement to the Frémicourt—Vaulx Vraucourt road, that is to a line extending from the western side of Frémicourt to the right of the 124th Brigade in the Green Line.

The 51st Divn remained in the Red Line throughout the day, with the 152nd and 153rd Bdes in the front line, the former, during the morning, forming a defensive right flank. From 3 P.M. onwards this flank suffered from shell fire directed by aeroplane observation, and after the 17th Division (V. Corps) had fallen back about 4 P.M., the Germans, following closely with machine guns, set about trying to enfilade the 152nd Bde. The latter managed, however, to hold on till 6 P.M. when it began to fall back in the dusk north-westwards on Bapaume, thereby involving the 154th Bde, which was in support. Not long afterwards corps orders for a retirement reached the front.

About 4 P.M. Lieut.-General Harper had been informed by telephone of the Third Army orders issued at 3.45 P.M. for retirement to the Bazentin—Sapignies line. To carry out this intention he summoned his divisional commanders back to Achiet le Petit (3 miles north-west of Grévillers), where they assembled between 5 and 6 P.M. The new line to be occupied by the corps was to run from Ligny Thilloy northwards, west of Bapaume, to the Red Line near Sapignies.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the right, the 19th Division was to hold from Le Barque to Avesnes inclusive, leaving outposts and machine guns to cover the roads leading east and south-east from Bapaume, and to keep close touch with the 2nd Divn of the V. Corps. Until the 19th Division was through Bapaume, the 51st Divn was to hold the Red Line, after which it was to withdraw into corps reserve west of Grévillers; and then the outposts of the 19th Division would be withdrawn, and all westerly exits from Bapaume covered by artillery and machine guns. North of the Bapaume—Cambrai road, the 41st Division was to extend from Avesnes to the east of Sapignies, keeping touch with the 19th Division. The 42nd Division (Major-General A. Solly

As a result of these orders Bapaume would have to be abandoned. Lieut.-General Harper in his reply to the Army said that he hoped to transfer two of his divisions (the 51st on the right and the 25th on the left) out of the five (19th, 25th, 41st, 42nd and 51st) he would be commanding, into corps reserve, and give them a chance to reorganize; that he had arranged that the progress of the Germans should be hindered as much as possible by the destruction of railways, roads, dumps and water-points in order to gain time for the tired troops to fall back; and that the retirement was to begin forthwith.

The orders reached the brigades between 7.30 and 8.30 p.m. South of the Bapaume—Cambrai railway, the 154th and 152nd Bdes (51st Divn) were already falling back, when they learnt that they were to concentrate near Loupart Wood, which lay about one mile south-west of Grévillers. Some difficulty was experienced in collecting the battalions of the 152nd Bde, as the roads leading to Ligny Thilloy were congested with transport and artillery; but eventually it was done. Then the two brigades moved without hindrance to their appointed place. They were covered whilst occupying the new line by a force of about a thousand reinforcements under Lieut.-Colonel S. McDonald commanding the 1/6th Seaforth Highlanders, just returned from leave. These were in position by 10 p.m., and then the exhausted troops were able to obtain food and rest.

About 7 p.m. the remaining brigade of the 51st Divn, the 153rd, still in position on the Red Line south of the Bapaume—Cambrai road, with parts of the 401st and 404th Field Companies R.E., and the pioneer battalion (1/8th Royal Scots) fighting alongside it, heard that the 152nd Bde, on its right, had fallen back. A defensive right flank was formed, but almost immediately afterwards the divisional orders to move to Loupart Wood were received. The Germans, who had reached Frémicourt

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Flood) was taking over the front held by the 40th Division, the right of the VI. Corps, and would extend its front to join the 41st Division. On completion of the relief, the 25th Division was also to withdraw into corps reserve at Achiet le Grand, and any troops of the 41st Division holding the line in the area of the 40th Division were to be collected in rear of their own division.

The Third Army had given permission at 9.45 A.M. for the VI. Corps to relieve the 40th Division by the 42nd Division, and at 10.40 A.M. had ordered the latter to come under the orders of the IV. Corps when this relief was completed. At 11.28 A.M. the VI. Corps had instructed the 42nd Division to take over the front as soon as possible, special efforts being made to complete the relief by daylight on the 25th.

some time previously, had been making repeated attempts to debouch from the village ; they were invariably driven back by machine-gun and rifle fire,<sup>1</sup> and the brigade and troops with it were thus able to slip away. They rejoined the rest of the division near Loupart Wood about 1 A.M. on the 25th.

North of the Bapaume—Cambrai road, the 57th Brigade (Br.-General T. A. Cubitt) had remained on the Red Line even longer than the 153rd Bde, until nearly 8 P.M. By this time the Germans had got through Frémicourt and were attacking the line strongly, whilst Bapaume itself was being heavily shelled. Falling back before the attackers, the 57th Brigade passed through the line occupied by the 56th Brigade and 58th Bde in the eastern outskirts of Bapaume, and established itself east of Grévillers, on the left of the front allotted to the 19th Division. Here the 56th and 58th, which remained in front of Bapaume until between 9.30 and 10.30 P.M., joined it. By 10.30 P.M. the Germans had come within rifle range, but made no attempt to force their way into the town, which their artillery had continued to shell until 10 P.M. Their cautious attitude enabled the two brigades to withdraw absolutely unmolested to the new position ; such was their inaction that except for the rumble of transport there was hardly a sound in their lines.<sup>2</sup> The 56th Brigade and 58th Bde came in on the south of the 57th and in touch with it, but with no connection on the right flank. Br.-General Cubitt, however, got into personal touch with 2nd Divn headquarters during the night.

Major-General Lawford (41st Divn) had during the morning issued confidential instructions in case a retreat should become necessary, and the brigadiers had prepared their orders for a retirement from the right. At 7 P.M. he directed that the line allotted to him—from Avesnes to east of

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 110, represents the fighting in and around Frémicourt (entered at 5 P.M.) as very severe and hand-to-hand, 60 British aeroplanes and tanks assisting the infantry.

<sup>2</sup> Some German accounts (e.g. Goes, p. 111) represent Bapaume as being stormed by the *1st Guard Reserve* and *20th Divisions* and its capture as the most important event of the 24th : "It appeared to be occupied by fresh 'British regiments'!" Regimental accounts, however, show that it was entered without fighting. An attack on the trenches covering Bapaume was ordered "after a long artillery preparation", but in the course of the morning it was postponed, and defensive measures ordered in fear of a counter-attack. No advance was made until 5 P.M., and there was no fighting. Bapaume was not occupied until 12.30 P.M. on the 25th. ("Guard 'Res. Regt. No. 2.'"). But the Germans continued to shell it throughout the night, and British patrols found the town empty at 5 A.M.

Sapignies—should be held by the 123rd and 124th Bdes, whilst the 122nd Bde, of which the two remaining battalions were still occupying the defensive flank facing Mory, was to prolong the left of the line as far as the south-eastern corner of Ervillers until relieved by the 42nd Division. It would then move back and occupy a position in rear and in support of the other two brigades. The 7th Bde (25th Division) was to be withdrawn with the 123rd and 124th Bdes, and, after passing through the front to be held by them, to proceed to Achiet le Petit and rejoin its own division. The divisional engineers holding the Red Line were to go back and prepare the line which the 122nd Bde was to occupy.

The retirement had actually begun before divisional orders reached the brigadiers, and was carried out under the persistent pursuit of the enemy. The 124th Bde, in spite of a heavy barrage, which came down about 5 p.m., held on to the Green Line astride the Bapaume—Vaulx Vraucourt road and north of it till 7 p.m., covering, to the best of its ability, the retreat of the 7th and 123rd Bdes.<sup>1</sup> On the left, opposite Mory, the 122nd Bde (less 18/K.R.R.C.) had suffered considerably from shelling and bombing during the day; it had to fall back under pressure from the south-east and from the north, and to form defensive flanks to keep off the enemy.

In the dark and the confusion the remnants of the 124th and 122nd Bdes failed to fall back to the line intended by the corps, namely from Avesnes to east of Sapignies, but occupied another some distance in front of it, in trenches parallel to and east of the Bapaume—Arras road. This caused a gap of over a mile between the right of the 41st Divn and the left of the 19th Division, through which the Germans began to trickle. To close it, Major-General Lawford sent his three field companies under the

<sup>1</sup> The 10th Tank Battalion, which during the 23rd had been placed at the disposal of the 41st Divn, had received orders at 3 p.m. from the IV. Corps to withdraw its headquarters and two of its companies from Sapignies to Logeast Wood, about three miles further west, there to come under the 25th Division. Only one company, therefore, remained at General Lawford's disposal. This was ordered to join the remainder of its battalion, but, luckily, before its departure it was able to render excellent service to the 41st Divn. The 7th Bde and part of the 123rd Bde had already suffered very heavily, and when the rearward movement was started they again became involved in bitter fighting. At this juncture Br.-General F. W. Towsey, commanding the 122nd Bde, sent six tanks up from Sapignies towards Favreuil, and their vigorous action covered the later part of the retirement of the infantry.

C.R.E. (Lieut.-Colonel E. N. Stockley). They arrived about 2 A.M. on the 25th, and by daylight had dug in astride the Achiet le Grand—Bapaume railway just south-east of Biefvillers, thus filling the breach. It was then discovered that the 74th Brigade (25th Division) of the corps reserve was entrenched behind on the Biefvillers ridge.<sup>1</sup> Later, at 2.30 A.M., Major-General Lawford ordered the brigades back to their assigned position, and the 122nd and 124th, with the 7th Bde, retired in the early hours of the 25th, the first-named into reserve near Bihucourt, its rear battalion, the 12/East Surrey losing very heavily. But the movement of the medley of battalions was not quite completed before daybreak. Morning, therefore, found the IV. Corps greatly fatigued, its brigades and battalions intermixed and by no means arranged according to plan on a definite position, as the map for the 25th March shows.

The orders issued at 7 P.M. for a general retirement resulted in a most difficult problem for the artillery of the corps. The right group, mainly near Ligny Thilloy, was ordered to concentrate between Achiet le Petit and Bucquoy, with the result that a long and serious block occurred in the former village. During the afternoon it had become apparent that the withdrawal of the infantry south of the Cambrai road would make the position of the batteries near Bapaume untenable; one field and one heavy brigade were therefore sent back to the south-west of Achiet le Grand. When, about 7 P.M., the orders for retirement were received, the batteries were directed to cover the withdrawal of the infantry to the new line, and then brought back gradually to the vicinity of Achiet le Grand, whence they were sent into new positions. The last battery did not leave the Bapaume—Sapignies line until 1 A.M. on the 25th; at one moment in the night practically the whole of the artillery of the IV. Corps was in the neighbourhood of Achiet le Petit; indeed sixty guns were still there after daylight on the 25th.

### *VI. Corps*

On the front of the VI. Corps<sup>2</sup> (Lieut.-General Sir

<sup>1</sup> The 75th Brigade remained east of Behagnies until relieved by the 42nd Division about 3.30 A.M. on the 25th, when it fell back to Logeast Wood, where it was joined by the survivors of the 7th Bde.

<sup>2</sup> 40th Divn, 31st, Guards and 3rd Divisions in front line, with the 34th in reserve north of Bucquoy, and the 42nd coming up. What remained

J. A. L. Haldane), which, saving its extreme right, was still in the Battle Zone, the night passed quietly, except, as already related, near Mory. The 40th Divn, holding the sector around this village, was still in some confusion. It had been hoped to reorganize its units during the hours of darkness ; but the uncertainty of the situation at Mory had prevented the completion of the necessary movements before dawn, and the return of daylight was the signal for the resumption of fighting all along the line. The Germans appeared to direct their main effort against Ervillers which, standing on a high spur projecting deeply into the Sensée (Mory) valley, was a tempting objective, and its capture would render untenable not only the Sensée Switch, to the north, but the Green Line nearly as far north as Hamelincourt.

The artillery of the corps was grouped in four sectors, corresponding to the four divisions in the front line.<sup>1</sup>

In the dim light of the dawn it could be seen that the enemy had massed heavy forces near Mory, which were beginning to move westwards,<sup>2</sup> and artillery fire was immediately opened upon them, whilst troops of the 119th Bde (Br.-General F. P. Crozier) and 4th Guards Brigade (Br.-General Lord Ardee) of the 40th Divn and 31st Division, formed a defensive flank facing south-east to guard the Sensée valley and to enfilade an attack on Ervillers. They withheld their fire until the leading German troops had pushed well forward, and then overwhelmed them with such a storm of bullets from rifles, Lewis guns and Vickers guns (in position on the forward slope of Ervillers spur) that the attack faded away. The enemy's attempts to move southwards up the valley towards Gomiecourt were similarly frustrated by the 120th Bde (Br.-General

of the 59th Divn (the 178th Bde mustered only 53 men) and its artillery (only 14 guns) was attached, under Br.-General C. H. L. James (177th Bde), to the 40th Divn.

- <sup>1</sup> Right Sector . . 40th and 59th Divn artillery and an Army field brigade under the 40th Divn ;
- Right Centre Sector . . 31st Division and 34th Divn artillery and a battery of the 3rd Division, under the 31st Division ;
- Left Centre Sector . . Guards Division artillery and an Army field brigade, under the Guards Division.
- Left Sector . . 3rd Division artillery (less a battery) and an Army field brigade, under the 3rd Division.

Two heavy brigades were allotted to each sector.

<sup>2</sup> Three German divisions, 2nd Guard Reserve, 111th and 221st (XVIII. Corps) had taken part in the fighting around Mory.

C. J. Hobkirk) and matters in this sector temporarily became quieter, although anxiety as to the situation in the Mory valley still continued.

North of the Sensée river, the 93rd Brigade (31st Division) and 3/Grenadier Guards, holding the switch, were very strongly attacked about 7 A.M., and fighting continued with but little intermission till midday. It then died down, the Germans, enfiladed by the 1/Grenadier Guards, further to the north, being unable to claim any advantage.

The Guards Division (Major-General G. P. T. Feilding), not being directly attacked, was able to inflict considerable casualties on forces moving obliquely across its front in the direction of Henin against the right of the 3rd Division (Major-General C. J. Deverell), where the enemy sought to seize the high ground on which stands Neuville Vitasse. The capture of this locality naturally attracted him since from it the whole of the defences of the XVII. Corps east of Arras could be turned. The brunt of the attack in this quarter fell on the 8th Brigade, holding the right of the line of the 3rd Division. The brigade was well supported by artillery, and fighting continued almost uninterruptedly during the day : not only was no ground lost, but great losses were inflicted on the enemy. A number of reinforcements recently received, for whom the fight was a baptism of fire, left the trenches in their enthusiasm and stood on the parapet, the better to mow down the oncoming enemy.

The congestion on the few available roads grew so serious that a divisional commander spent three hours and a half travelling by car the distance of one mile near Bucquoy. This congestion naturally caused great uneasiness as to the ammunition supply ; but as plenty of dumps had been formed and batteries informed of their whereabouts by artillery staff officers, no lack of shells was actually experienced.

Towards 2.30 P.M. fighting again rose to full fury. On the right, the enemy, after his repulse of the morning, had spent the intervening hours in preparation for another attack from the north-east on Ervillers. Under cover of the fire of two or three brigades of field artillery brought up in close support on Mory ridge, the enemy's infantry advance—in detached parties of varying strength—was resumed at about 3 P.M. Again the 119th Bde and 4th Guards Brigade inflicted heavy losses, and the attack came to a standstill. At the same hour the 93rd Brigade north

of the Sensée was fiercely attacked ; but here also the assault broke down. In the midst of the fighting it was reported to Major-General Ponsonby (40th Divn) that the Sensée Switch had fallen, and that the enemy, advancing down the valley south-westwards from St. Leger, was in rear of the 119th Bde and 4th Guards Brigade. The report was false, but took time to disprove and almost at the same moment he was warned by Lieut.-General Haldane that, owing to the impending withdrawal of the IV. Corps, it would be necessary for the 40th Divn to bring back its right to the neighbourhood of Favreuil in order to keep touch with its neighbour. Preparations were therefore made for withdrawal.

The 42nd Division (Major-General A. Solly-Flood), brought up in buses, without artillery, engineers or transport or even horses for the staff and mounted officers, was still in the neighbourhood of Adinfer Wood (7 miles S.S.W. of Arras) when, at 10 A.M., orders were received that it would relieve the 40th Divn during the ensuing night. Later in the day, Major-General Solly-Flood decided to take up a line roughly north and south through Sapignies, through which the 40th Divn would fall back. The 125th and 126th Brigades (Br.-Generals H. Fargus and W. W. Seymour) were moved up to Logeast Wood and at dusk went forward to take position ; but whilst actually on the march the heads of the columns were stopped by a staff officer,<sup>1</sup> who diverted them south-eastwards, the relief of the 40th Divn having been cancelled, as the Germans were reported to have broken through at Sapignies—Behagnies.<sup>2</sup> Patrols sent out to clear up the situation did not confirm the information ; but the 42nd Division took position to block the supposed gap facing east and south : the 125th Brigade in Behagnies (actually behind the 120th Bde as it turned out), the 127th (Br.-General A. M. Henley) west of it, and the 126th in reserve around Gomiecourt, with the batteries deployed so as to fire east towards Mory and south to Sapignies.

In preparation for the withdrawal of the 40th Divn, Major-General Ponsonby sent back Br.-General J. Campbell (121st Bde) at 7 P.M. to the railway embankment which

<sup>1</sup> It is in dispute whether he belonged to the 40th Divn or the VI. Corps.

<sup>2</sup> The alarm is supposed to have originated in a dump of Very lights and explosives which, having been fired, sent up lights at intervals. There are, however, reports that the Germans did break in near Behagnies, but advanced no further than the VI. Corps Officers' Club.

runs north-south through Achiet le Grand, there to collect any men who came back. Soon afterwards the right flank of the 120th Bde became exposed by the retirement of the 124th Bde (IV. Corps). A defensive flank was formed, but not until nearly 10 P.M. did Major-General Ponsonby order the withdrawal of his right, the 120th Bde, first to the Red Line east of Gomiecourt, on which the divisional engineers and the pioneers had been working. Here it found the 177th Bde (59th Divn) which, according to plan, should have been relieved by the 42nd Division.

Northward of the 120th Bde, around Ervillers, there was hard and confused fighting during the night which upset the arrangements for relief. The 4th Guards Brigade had been ordered to sidestep southward to take over the 119th Bde's one battalion front (actually held by the 13/Green Howards of the 121st Bde) in the Green Line south of the Sensée Switch, this being the pivot of the change of front. Whilst this movement was in progress, and the 119th Bde was withdrawing about 10 P.M., the Germans attacked and entered the trenches in question at the same time as the 4th Guards Brigade. Hand-to-hand fighting ensued, during which some Germans pushed through even to Ervillers and southward; but they were driven back by the 1/10th Manchester, sent up by Major-General Solly-Flood from the 126th Brigade which was now his reserve, and by the 177th Bde. The Guards and the 119th Bde, now very weak, under the direction of Br.-General Lord Ardee (4th Guards Brigade), managed to form a defensive flank along the Ervillers-St. Leger road, in touch on the right with the 92nd Brigade (31st Division). This latter brigade had been in reserve early in the day holding a line running north of Ervillers; but as the fighting grew in violence, it was gradually moved south to cover that village and assisted during the afternoon in checking the German progress.

Thus, after a fight in the dark which left the troops who were near Mory and Ervillers broken up into small parties and intermixed, the enemy effort was defeated, and the swing back to keep contact with the IV. Corps was accomplished, although the reliefs intended had not been carried out.<sup>1</sup> For many hours after the fighting

<sup>1</sup> Maps 9 and 11 show only the general position of the troops near Mory and Ervillers, as brigades, themselves not up to the strength of normal battalions, were intermixed. So small were the brigades, indeed, that the headquarters of the 119th, 120th and 177th were all in Gomiecourt, where also those of the 125th and 127th were subsequently accommodated.

ceased, Germans, who having lost their way were wandering or hiding, continued to be rounded up ; they had been sent forward, so some of them said, with no more instructions than to march on a star.

The artillery of the 40th Divn sector (less the 14 guns of the 59th Divn which remained) withdrew about midnight of the 24th/25th March ; the field batteries retired to positions already reconnoitred and marked round Gomie-court and the heavies to others three miles north-west of Logeast Wood, their former position ; the 40th Divn Ammunition Column, at considerable risk, then cleared all ammunition from the forward positions. The 8-inch and 9.2-inch howitzers of the corps were sent back in the early morning of the 25th to park six to eleven miles south-west of Arras.

### XVII. Corps

There was great artillery activity on the XVII. Corps front and considerable movement behind the German lines opposite it ; but the infantry was not in action, except that one company on the right of the corps was involved in the attack on the 3rd Division (VI. Corps). The position of the corps was therefore unchanged.

The final report of the Third Army to G.H.Q. sent off at 10.25 P.M. ran :—

V. Corps are continuing their withdrawal successfully. 17th Div. are encountering considerable opposition in their withdrawal, but movement is proceeding satisfactorily. Party of Tank Corps armed with Lewis guns has reached Longueval. IV. Corps report that they have had considerable fighting and still hold the Green Line except where it has turned back to conform to V. Corps line. Unconfirmed report states that the enemy has reached Bapaume—Arras road between Bapaume and Sapignies. VI. Corps report right division was attacked 7 P.M. Driven off with loss. Otherwise no change.

To sum up the situation of the Third Army ; the V. Corps had finally escaped the danger of being cut off in the Flesquières Salient, and its retreat to the Bazentin—Ligny Thilloy line had made an end of the long defensive flank facing south which had been so difficult to maintain against German attacks north-westwards. On the southern flank the V. Corps was nearly 17 miles west of its original front line, but the depth of ground abandoned gradually decreased as the new line ran north until, beyond

the Cojeul, it was practically negligible. Henceforward, with the addition of the VII. Corps from the left of the Fifth Army, the Third Army would have as its right boundary the river Somme. Holding a line 27 miles long with five corps, and having the 12th, 62nd and New Zealand Divisions, and the 3rd, 4th and 5th Australian Divisions concentrating in rear, General Byng and the Third Army as a whole felt confident of maintaining their front, however much the V. Corps might have been shaken. It is true that there was a good deal of disorganization of divisions, brigades and battalions ; that touch between the various corps was slight ; that the line was really far from stable and the troops were very tired. But the men neither knew nor cared about the danger of the strategic position, that they had been beaten by the Germans never entered their minds. Their thoughts were turned to relief, rest and food.

There was a marked increase of air fighting on the 24th, that is, over the German lines, for few enemy planes flew over the British on this day. A total of 41 German aeroplanes were claimed as destroyed, of which 17 were shot down on the front of the Fifth Army, and 24 on the front of the Third ; but there were undoubtedly further casualties. The total losses of the R.F.C. were 11 machines missing, 46 wrecked and 8 burnt or abandoned.

Air attacks were occasionally made on German troops, particularly those trying to cross the Somme at Pargny and Béthencourt, but neither artillery nor infantry received much direct assistance on this day. In a retreat when aerodromes were being moved to the rear such help was not to be expected.

The main bombing by the headquarters squadron was again directed against railway junctions during the day, and continued on the whole front during the night, particularly on junctions, bridges and billets. The enemy was similarly active, and bombed Amiens and Longueau, the railway triangle south-east of the city, blowing up an ammunition train and interrupting traffic until 11 A.M. on the 25th. But neither British nor enemy efforts were continued sufficiently long to produce anything like decisive results.

Sir Douglas Haig, having first sent his Chief of the General Staff, Lieut.-General Sir H. Lawrence, to General Gough's headquarters, had, as we have seen, himself visited

Third Army headquarters,<sup>1</sup> and was able to assure himself that there was certainly no despondency. He had instructed General Byng to hold on to the First Army near Arras with his left at all costs, and informed him that his intention was to concentrate all possible reserves by thinning the line on the north ; with these he hoped to strike a vigorous blow southwards if the enemy penetrated to the region of Amiens. The outcome of the present situation, however, depended on what the French would do in the Fifth Army area south of the Somme, and this the British Commander-in-Chief was soon to learn.

First, General Lawrence returned. He had seen not only General Gough, but, as we know, also General Fayolle, who had stated that he would receive no more troops for four days (that is, until the 28th). Then, at 11 P.M., General Pétain, accompanied by Br.-General Clive, the head of the British Mission at G.Q.G., again arrived at Dury. He was evidently upset and very anxious.<sup>2</sup> Sir Douglas Haig explained to him the plan which had been communicated to General Byng, told him that all British troops south of the Somme would operate under General Fayolle's orders, and again asked him to concentrate as large a force as possible about Amiens astride the Somme to co-operate on the British right. General Pétain replied that certainly the British Army was unfortunately situated, but he expected every moment to be attacked in Champagne, and he did not believe that the main German blow had yet been delivered ; nevertheless, he would give General Fayolle, commanding south of the Somme, all available troops. He then went on to say that he had seen General Fayolle during the day at Montdidier, where the French reserves were being collected, and had directed him, in the event of the German advance being pressed further, to fall back south-westwards in order to cover Paris. He then handed to Sir Douglas Haig a copy of the order, which is here translated, sent out to the French Armies :—

#### I. INFORMATION OF THE ENEMY

(a) After having thrown back the British Third and Fifth Armies to the line Fampoux [east of Arras]—Bapaume—Péronne and

<sup>1</sup> See pages 418, 427.

<sup>2</sup> F.O.A. gives no narrative of the very important interview which followed : it merely says, “le général Pétain se rend de Compiègne à Dury, ‘où vers 23 heures il voit le Maréchal Haig’”. The British account was reduced to writing at once.

the line of the Somme—Crozat canal during the 22nd and 23rd March, and forced passages at Tergnier, Jussy and Ham during the evening of the 22nd or the following night, the enemy crossed the river at Béthencourt during the morning of the 24th.

In the north he has reached Cléry sur Somme—Combles and passed the ridge Rancourt—Sailly Saillisel.

Such portions of our Third Army as have been detrained are engaged in a very hard fight on the front Chauny, Commençons, Neuville en Beine, Villeselve, and westward.

South of the Oise, our situation has not changed. Our artillery posted on the southern bank has the valley and the slopes north of Chauny under fire.

(b) The object of the enemy seems to be :

Group of Armies of Crown Prince of Bavaria :

To separate the British Third Army from the Fifth in the region north of Péronne and to drive back the principal part of the British Armies towards the north.

Group of Armies of the Imperial Crown Prince :

To smash the right of the British Fifth Army and thus to open the way towards Amiens and Beauvais.

## II. INTENTIONS OF THE GENERAL COMMANDING-IN-CHIEF

Before everything to keep the French Armies together as one solid whole ; in particular, not to allow the G.A.R. to be cut off from the rest of our forces. Secondly, if it is possible, to maintain liaison with the British forces.

To conduct the battle on these lines.

## III. MISSION OF THE G.A.R.

The G.A.R. will contain the enemy, resting the right of the Third Army on the Oise, and retiring, if it is necessary, on the general line Noyon—Porquéricourt—Lagny—Roye, which will become its line of resistance.

The First Army, according to circumstances and the state of its detraining, will :

- (a) either prolong the left of the Third Army in order to connect it to the right of the British, if the latter continue to hold ;
- (b) or reinforce and support the Third Army either by occupying in advance positions on which the latter Army will fall back, or by counter-attacking.

The cavalry, sent towards the left of our forces, will reconnoitre and cover the left of the G.A.R. (principal mission), at the same time endeavouring to obtain liaison with the British right (subsidiary mission).

The British Fifth Army will hold the enemy as long as possible on the Somme and will retire, should it become necessary, on the line of the Avre between Montdidier and Amiens.

#### IV. MISSION OF THE G.A.N.

The G.A.N. will at all costs hold the line of the Ailette as far as Manicamp, thence to the south-west of the Oise, maintaining in all cases its liaison with the G.A.R.

It was clear to Sir Douglas Haig that the effect of this order must be to separate the French from the British and allow the enemy to penetrate between the two national forces. He at once asked General Pétain if he meant to abandon the British right flank. The French general did not speak but nodded his head, and then said, "It is the 'only thing possible, if the enemy compels the Allies to 'fall back still further'."

The British Commander-in-Chief now realized that the basic principle of the French strategy was to cover Paris and not, as arranged, to maintain touch with the British. In his opinion, the existence of the B.E.F. in France and the outcome of the War depended upon keeping the French and British Armies united. He therefore reported by telegram the sudden change in French strategy to the C.I.G.S. and the Secretary of State for War. He had already, at 6.45 P.M., in reporting the situation, suggested that the C.I.G.S. should come to France to confer. He now requested that both he and Lord Milner should come at once, making it clear that unless General Foch, or some other determined general who would fight, were given supreme command of the operations in France, there would be a disaster.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It would appear that on 24th March 1918 General Pétain did not fully understand the situation and got it into his head that the British were retiring not westwards but northwards. Colonel Herbillon, one of the two liaison officers between G.Q.G. and the Government, records in his second volume, pp. 229-30, under date 24th March 1918, that General Pétain, at 10 A.M., directed him to take a message to President Poincaré at once :

"l'obstination de Douglas Haig à toujours faire appuyer *vers le nord* lui  
"fait craindre de ne pouvoir faire tenir le soudure. . . . Il demande  
"instamment au Gouvernement de faire effort sur les Anglais pour les  
"décider s'appuyer sur lui et à ne pas le forcer à s'étendre indéfiniment  
"pour aller à eux ; sans quoi c'est la séparation".

That there was a misunderstanding is confirmed in Poincaré, x. p. 87, where Clemenceau tells the President that he had learnt at Versailles that Haig wished to retire *northwards*.

An insight into Pétain's state of mind is given in Poincaré, x. pp. 85-90, quoted in connection with the Doullens Conference (see Chapter XIX.).

## NOTE

## THE GERMANS ON THE 24TH MARCH

The divergence of the directions imposed upon the three German Sketches Armies by O.H.L. was hardly noticeable on the 24th. According to 6, 17. the change in its rôle the *Eighteenth Army* had no longer to extend northwards to cover the advance of the *Second*, but the latter had to extend southwards to facilitate the progress of the former. Hutier's Army "had become the spearhead, from which even still greater successes were expected, instead of carrying out its original task of "protecting the left flank of the 'Michael' attack". The Noyon—Chaulnes line was to be reached, but attainment fell six to ten miles short of this goal. The left and centre made a considerable advance, but the right, which extended as far as St. Christ, was held up. The *Eighteenth Army* had been reinforced by three divisions of its eastern neighbour, the *Seventh Army*, on the 21st, three divisions of the general reserve on the 22nd, and two more from the *Seventh Army* on the 23rd.

The *Second Army*, front St. Christ—Le Transloy, was to reach the line Lihons (11 miles south-west of Péronne)—Miraumont ; but its left was held up on the Somme, and elsewhere it was some seven miles short of its objectives, except in the centre, where, at the junction between the Fifth and Third Armies, the named line had nearly been reached. "The right wing advanced only very slowly owing to "the enemy's counter-attacks. Further south, also there was bitter "fighting with the enemy's rear guards, especially at Combles, where "English tanks and cavalry came into action. In spite of this, the "Army managed to advance and push the enemy back partly on "Bapaume and partly towards the Ancre.

"By nightfall, the line Beaulencourt (south-east of Bapaume)—"west of Lesbœufs—west of Longueval . . . had been reached. At "Beaulencourt touch was gained with the *Seventeenth Army*."

In the evening General von der Marwitz reported the enemy "broken wherever he had been encountered . . . strong columns "have been seen this afternoon marching from Albert westwards (*sic*). "Numerous fires in Albert."

Such general accounts of the doings of the *Seventeenth Army* as are available do not quite correspond with the British nor with the German regimental histories, which make no large claims of marked success. The objective was Miraumont—St. Pol (more than 20 miles behind Arras), which it was very far from reaching ; in fact it made little progress and had stood on the defensive until the Third Army swung back in the evening. Schwarze states, "the resistance both "north and south of the Scarpe, east of Arras, was very stiff, and "there were counter-attacks ; in this sector only the *IX. Reserve Corps* succeeded in breaking through at Henin and St. Martin [not "on the 24th], and at these places spirited charges of the British from "Neuville Vitasse were repulsed. The left flank, on the other hand, "won a great success : Bapaume was captured after hard fighting "(*sic*). North of the town, the *XVIII. Corps* pushed forward to

"Ervillers [but failed to get there] ; the *VI. Reserve Corps* captured the first Bapaume switch, then Beugnatre, reached the Arras—Bapaume road, and at 8 p.m. stormed (*sic*) the eastern edge of Bapaume, which was defended by many machine guns. In the town itself a mass of moving English columns had for a long time been under artillery fire [this was not the case] and two retiring batteries were blown up by aerial bombs [no such incident is known "to the R.A.]."

"The *XIV. Reserve Corps* captured Frémicourt and Riencourt, repulsed counter-attacks, especially at Frémicourt, and by evening was on the Bapaume—Péronne road. The *XI. Corps* had to stave off a tank attack against its right flank [cannot be identified], but pushed on past Bertincourt, Barastre and Haplincourt to near Beaulencourt, and then came up level with the *XIV. Reserve Corps*. English wireless messages spoke of arrangements for counter-attack as well as orders for retreat. [No such messages sent by wireless can be traced.]

"The events of the day as regards the left flank corresponded to the plans of the Higher Command. Before midday Crown Prince Rupprecht's headquarters had directed that the pursuit westwards must be carried out vigorously in order to help the *Second Army* over the Ancre. The objectives which the Army headquarters had thereupon defined for *VI. Reserve*, *XIV. Reserve* and *XI. Corps* [front Mory—Beaulencourt] were attained. In the afternoon a telephone message was received from O.H.L. that the *Seventeenth Army* was to push on relentlessly towards Doullens, as this would render the 'Mars' attack unnecessary.<sup>1</sup> The orders issued by the 'Army in the evening conformed to these instructions.'

"The *XVIII. Corps* was directed on Monchy au Bois, the *VI. Reserve Corps* on Fonquevillers and the *XIV. Reserve Corps* on Hébuterne. It was hoped that the movements of the last-named corps would open up the passage of the Ancre for the *Second Army*. The right wing (*I. Bavarian Reserve*, *III. Bavarian* and *IX. Reserve Corps*) was to follow up if the enemy fell back ; otherwise it was to attack according to the plans for the 'Mars' attack : 'Mars North' to take place on the 26th ; 'Mars South', on the 27th March.

"The *XI. Corps* headquarters was broken up ; as space for the corps began to be short, most of its divisions were withdrawn and put under the *XIV. Reserve Corps*. Touch had been gained with the *Second Army* south-east of Bapaume, although the object of the concentric movement, the cutting off of the English in the Cambrai salient, had not been achieved."

The following order was issued at 1.30 p.m. by Crown Prince Rupprecht :

"The *Second* and *Seventeenth Armies* will continue the pursuit without a halt and with the greatest energy towards the west. The *Seventeenth Army* will make any divisions of its left wing which become available follow in second line. It has also as a mission to facilitate the passage of the Ancre by the *Second Army* by pushing on via Mirumont. It must at all costs be avoided that the *Second Army* should be blocked on the Ancre."

<sup>1</sup> Foerster, p. 106, gives the message as : "The mission of the *Seventeenth Army* for the next few days will be to push without pause in the direction of Doullens ; it may thus be possible to abandon entirely the 'Mars' attack on both sides of the Scarpe".

Thus the centre of gravity of the operations of the *Seventeenth Army* was shifted from St. Pol southwards to Doullens, and the Army was again directed west instead of north-west, and General von Below gave his corps the objective Hébuterne—Fonquevillers—Monchy au Bois, a north-south line, well to the south of Arras. For the *Eighteenth Army*, Noyon—Chaulnes remained the objective

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

25TH MARCH 1918

(Maps 10, 11 ; Sketches 6, 18)

#### FIFTH ARMY

**Map 10.** On the 25th March the ground mist cleared earlier than on the preceding day, disappearing in the river valleys soon after 7.30 A.M. But, in spite of this advantage to the defence, and the arrival of the French divisions, the barrier of the Somme was lost, and a considerable retirement took place along the whole line of battle. The right of the Third Army, indeed, made so large a withdrawal that, at the close of the day, its flank was over four miles behind the left of the Fifth Army on the Somme near Frise.

The command of the troops of the Fifth Army south of the river (III., XVIII. and XIX. Corps) had passed from G.H.Q. to General Fayolle (commanding the Group of Armies of the Reserve, known as the G.A.R.,<sup>1</sup> with headquarters at Verberie), who, however, issued no orders to General Gough. The III. Corps was now with General Pellé (V. Corps), whose own troops were Diébold's Group (55th and 125th Divisions), the 9th and 10th Divisions and 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division ; the XVIII. Corps was under General Robillot (French II. Cavalry Corps)<sup>2</sup> together with the French 62nd and 22nd Divisions. The XIX. Corps, though under General Fayolle, still received orders through and from General Gough.

The French troops above-mentioned formed the Third

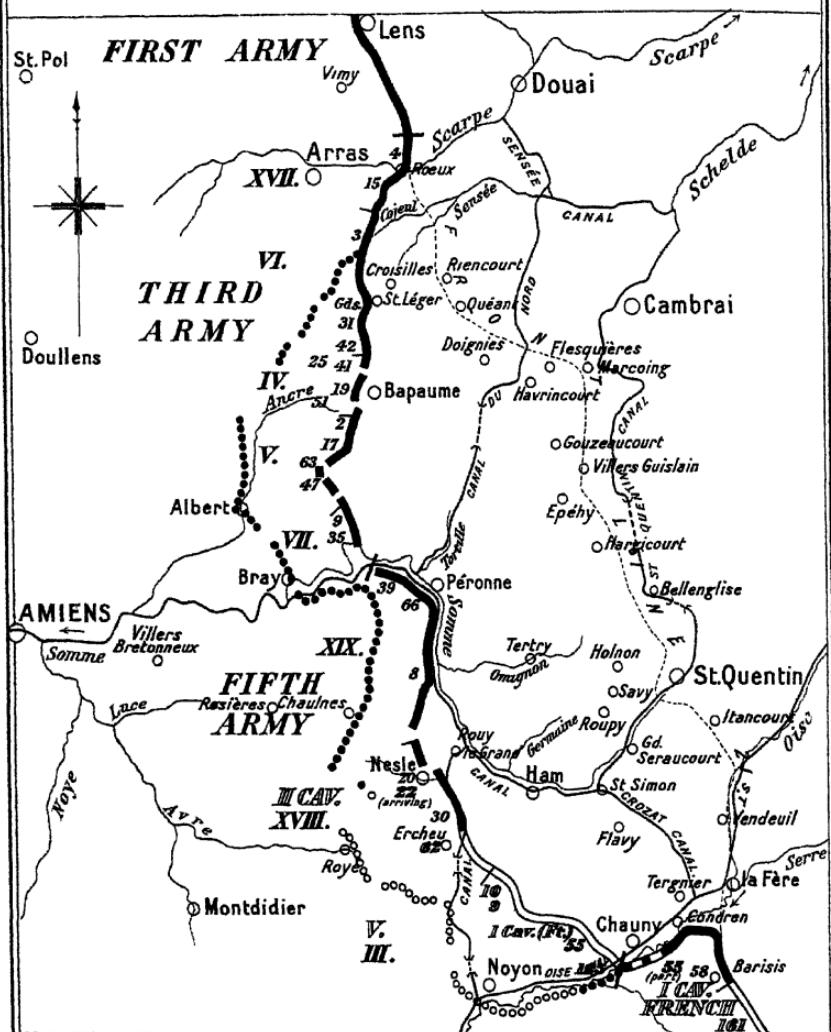
<sup>1</sup> Similarly, G.A.N. was used for the Group of Armies of the North (on the right of the British), G.A.C. for Group of Armies of the Centre, and G.A.E. for Group of Armies of the East.

<sup>2</sup> He had no cavalry divisions under him and, to prevent confusion, his command is referred to by his name.



Sketch 18.

## 25<sup>TH</sup> MARCH.



Miles 10

SCALE.

9

10

20 Miles

Prepared in the Historical Section (Military Branch)

Army, commanded by General Humbert (headquarters Montdidier), and on its left, between it and the British Third Army, it was proposed to interpolate a French First Army (General Debeney), and thus relieve the XIX. Corps. General Humbert was made responsible for the detrainment and distribution of the divisions of the First Army as they might arrive until General Debeney should be ready to take command. To cover the detrainment he was given three cavalry divisions, the 1st (actually on the left of the Sixth Army, where, with the British 58th Divn, it was guarding the passages of the Oise ; it did not complete its movement until 11 A.M. on the 26th) ; the 5th (*en route* from Paris ; it went into action at 9.30 A.M. on the 26th) ; and the 6th (*en route* from the G.A.C. ; it did not reach Montdidier until the 27th).<sup>1</sup> The only reserve at General Fayolle's disposal on the 25th was the 85th Division, *en route* in lorries for Montdidier, whence it was to be sent on some twenty miles further to Noyon. The 56th, however, the first of the six divisions of the First Army to appear, had begun to detrain at Montdidier during the night of the 24th/25th.<sup>2</sup>

### *III. Corps Area*

Of British units in the area, the 18th Divn was in the line between Diébold's Group and the French 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division, the 61st Bde (XVIII. Corps) in support of the French 9th Division,<sup>3</sup> and the 14th Divn

<sup>1</sup> F.O.A. vi. (i.), p. 313.

<sup>2</sup> Other divisions assigned to the French First Army were the 12th, 127th and 166th, forming the VI. Corps, the 35th and 36th, forming the XVIII. Corps (reserve of the G.A.N.), the 3 divisions of cavalry already mentioned in the text, 6 regiments of heavy artillery, and an aviation group (from the Fifth Army ; but this General Franchet d'Esperey declined to give up). In general, the reinforcing divisions were taken from the G.A.N. (General Franchet d'Esperey) in which they were replaced by others drawn from the G.A.E. (General de Castelnau).

General Pétain, late on the 24th, had ordered the G.A.E. to entrain six more divisions for the G.A.R., the 17th, 18th, 59th, 152nd, 31st and Moroccan, but, even using the maximum capacity of the railways, it would be several days before they could arrive. Further, on the morning of the 25th, he ordered to Abbeville the 133rd Division, then in reserve on the coast (it did not complete detraining near Amiens until 4th April), and to the G.A.R. the 77th Division from the G.A.N., with three more heavy artillery regiments from the G.A.E.

<sup>3</sup> The 61st Bde, so weak that it was organized in four companies, was sent back in the early morning six miles westward to Ecuville. Here, at 1 P.M., it was ordered to embus at Avricourt and go to a new back line Gruny—Liancourt, north of Roye. It arrived there at 8 P.M., and found

with the 4th and 5th Dismounted Brigades in support at Beaurains.

The Germans continued their advance early. But during the night, without even awaiting their attack, the commander of the French 10th Division, fearing for his right flank, withdrew his troops to a line running southwestward from Freniches and left rear guards in their old position only till break of day.<sup>1</sup> The resistance offered by the French divisions, fighting without their own artillery and without ammunition supply, did not last long. As early as 5 A.M. General Diébold issued instructions for a retirement, should it become necessary, to the south of the Oise, pivoting on the right. "The fears of General Diébold "were soon justified." About 7 A.M. the Germans broke in between the 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division and the 9th Division, turned their flanks and drove them back. A little after 8 A.M. the French 1st and 35th Divisions, then arriving near Noyon, were placed, in accordance with telephonic instructions, at General Pellé's orders for a counter-attack towards Chauny—Guiscard. General Grégoire, the commander of the 1st Division, was placed in command of a group containing his own division, the 9th, the 1st Dismounted Cavalry, and "the débris of the "British 18th Divn". It was too late: by 4 P.M. Diébold's Group had crossed the Oise without great difficulty, "the German artillery firing only feebly at the bridge", and, with General Pellé's approval, Grégoire's Group (less the 9th Division), was, by orders issued at 3.30 P.M., also brought south of the Oise, "a movement executed without "much difficulty".

Br.-General L. W. de V. Sadleir-Jackson, commanding the 54th Bde, found that the retirement of the 18th Divn might involve the loss of some French guns near Babœuf. He stopped his brigade and, tired though his men were, retook the village, capturing ten machine guns and killing, or taking prisoner, 230 Germans. The brigade remained in its rear-guard position in front of Babœuf until 2 A.M. on the 26th, when it withdrew, and the bridges were then blown up. The 18th Divn (less artillery, which was kept by the French) was then sent to an area ten miles south-

both German and French patrols in Liancourt; at 11 P.M. it was ordered to concentrate two miles in rear at Fresnoy (north of Roye), where it rejoined the 20th Divn.

<sup>1</sup> F.O.A. vi. (i.), p. 278.

east of Noyon, and did not rejoin the III. Corps until the 31st at Villers Bretonneux.

As a result of the retirement of the French 10th Division, the Germans penetrated into and enlarged the gap between it and the French 9th Division. The latter formation, with the 35th Division when it arrived, had originally been designated, to cover Noyon, if no more, but it had been forced to fall back to the heights south-west of the town, whilst the 35th, which was ordered to counter-attack, had been broken up, three battalions being sent to support the 1st Dismounted Cavalry, three to the 10th Division, whilst the rest remained in reserve south of Noyon. When the French troops fell back, "unfortunately by a 'malentendu' [apparently on the part of the G.O.C. 35th Division, which eventually re-assembled south of Noyon] 'the important position of the heights, Montagne de Porquericourt, [N.N.W. of Noyon] was left without defenders'. There was, in fact, a gap of three miles on the left of the 9th Division; for the 10th Division, attacked at 7 A.M., had gradually given ground. By 4.30 P.M. it had been split into two and, covered by Harman's Detachment,<sup>1</sup> which had been placed under it, had gone back some six miles, behind the Canal du Nord near Beaurains.

The British 14th Divn (Major-General W. H. Greenly), in reserve, was ordered by General Pellé to concentrate south-west of Thiescourt (6 miles west of Noyon), as soon as it had been relieved. When, therefore, about 4 P.M. the 9th Division was driven back, the 42nd and 43rd Bdes were withdrawn, covered by the 41st, to a rear-guard position on the rising ground behind Beaurains. Again, after dark, between 7 and 8 P.M., the 41st Bde fell back, and during the night the whole division (less its artillery, which had been covering the French 9th Division all day) was concentrated at Thiescourt, as originally ordered.

On the night of the 24th/25th, the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions, less Harman's Detachment, had been ordered to assemble at Bailly (5 miles south of Noyon) and Carlepont (4 miles S.S.E of Noyon) respectively; at the earnest request of Lieut.-General Butler (III. Corps), General Pellé had agreed that all dismounted cavalrymen should be withdrawn from the line and concentrated for use, mounted, a request the wisdom of which was soon to be demonstrated.

<sup>1</sup> During the day this was reinforced by about six hundred mounted men from the 4th and 5th Cavalry Brigades, and from the 5th Lancers and Northumberland Hussars of the 3rd.

By 10 A.M. on the 25th some eleven hundred mounted men of the 2nd Cavalry Division had been organized under Br.-General T. T. Pitman, and were employed to watch the passages of the Oise, east of Noyon; but at night, after the French had crossed the river, they were moved to Chiry (3 miles south-west of Noyon), where they came under the 14th Divn. Part was sent forward to Mont Renaud, half-way to Noyon, to cover the retirement of the French 9th Division. In the 3rd Cavalry Division the dismounted detachments were in General Pellé's reserve: those of the 7th and Canadian Cavalry Brigades were not collected at Carlepont before 6 P.M.; those of the 6th were not released until 6 A.M. on the 26th, and did not rejoin the 3rd Cavalry Division until the 27th.

The heavy artillery of the III. Corps, except eight 6-inch howitzers, was relieved in the evening and withdrawn.

Thus, by the end of the day, the French, although they had lost much ground, had relieved the III. Corps, except the 58th Divn and the 53rd Bde (18th Divn) which were in the line south of the Oise; but they had retained all the field artillery of the corps.

### *XVIII. Corps Area*

In the XVIII. Corps area, now commanded by General Robillot, the French 62nd Division held the right: it extended from Freniches, to the east and  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles in front of the Canal du Nord, as far as Lannoy Farm on the canal bank; the remnants of the 36th (Ulster) Divn were in reserve. The British 30th and 20th Divns, with the brigades of the 61st attached, held the centre (along the canal), and the left (covering Nesle). Behind the left of the corps, the French 22nd Division was assembling.

Between the left flank and the right of the XIX. Corps there was a gap of nearly a mile, covered by the 24th Divn in the support line three miles in rear. In this gap, in the village of Potte, there were already some Germans, and immediately south of the gap the 183rd Bde (61st Divn) was extended to block no less than  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles of front. There was, therefore, every prospect of the Germans increasing their advantage; and this they proceeded to do.

The counter-attack by the French 22nd Division, in co-operation with the 8th Division of the XIX. Corps, under the orders of General Robillot, which had been

planned with the object of closing the gap and regaining the line of the Somme north of the Ingou stream, did not take place, even if it had ever been intended. Zero had been fixed for 8 A.M., but at that hour the French troops were still behind the line of the 20th Divn, and not in position on their starting line Rouy le Grand—Mesnil le Petit ; and they showed no intention of moving there. General Robillot informed the XVIII. Corps that he had postponed the operation until 11 A.M. ; but in spite of this assertion the 22nd Division began, soon afterwards, to go not forward, but southward, marching away from the gap.<sup>1</sup> The Germans, however, did not wait to be counter-attacked, moving forward at 8 A.M. and throwing all the Allied troops on the defensive : "The [French] 62nd Division, "assaulted in front and uncovered on the right by the "retirement of the 10th Division, quickly found itself in "a difficult position, and at 10.45 A.M. General Robillot "ordered it to conform to the movement of retreat of "the 10th Division, delaying the progress of the enemy "as much as possible". By 4 P.M. the 62nd had fallen back about two and a half miles to the line Campagne (on the canal)—Ercheu, having lost Libermont and the whole line of the Canal du Nord from Campagne northwards as far as the right flank of the British 30th Divn.

Up to this hour the 30th Divn and the right of the 20th Divn, though shelled and under constant machine-gun fire, had successfully resisted all attempts of the enemy to cross the canal : now they found themselves shelled from the right rear, whilst Germans were advancing northwards up the western side of the canal to envelop their right flank. At 4.30 P.M., therefore, orders were given for the 30th Divn to retire, beginning on the right, through the troops of the French 22nd Division, now formed in rear of it near Moyencourt. The enemy was by this time close up, and considerable casualties were suffered during the retirement. At Buverchy bridge, the remnants of the 2/6th R. Warwickshire (182nd Bde) and an attached company of the 1/5th Duke of Cornwall's L.I. (Pioneers of the 61st Divn), made a gallant counter-attack, but the enemy was too strong to be checked except for the moment. After

<sup>1</sup> F.O.A. vi. (i.) does not say a word about the counter-attack in the account of the operations of the 25th. Boulaire, p. 243, states that the British counter-attacking troops could not be ready until between 10 and 11 A.M. ; this, however, was not the case. Possibly there was a misunderstanding.

passing through the French, the 30th Divn was re-assembled and retired with the 22nd, to a position in front of Roye. During the night and early morning of the 26th it was moved by Lieut.-General Maxse's orders, to Arvillers and Folies (7 miles W.N.W. of Roye).

The right of the 20th Divn (60th and 184th Bdes) continued to hold the line of the canal until 6 P.M.; but, having both its flanks open—the enemy had got through Nesle, as will be related—it was ordered to withdraw, and, like the 30th, joined the French 22nd Division.

On the left of the XVIII. Corps front the thin line of the 59th and 183rd Bdes, covering four miles of front, made a long and gallant fight when the Germans attacked at 8 A.M., with the support of ten French machine guns which came up at 11 A.M. Many of the men were captured and some driven westwards, but the majority fell back slowly, and about 2 P.M. rallied on the French 22nd Division, whose left was then at Billancourt (1½ miles S.S.W. of Nesle).

On the previous evening the French 22nd Division had been extended north-westwards from Nesle behind the British 59th and 183rd Bdes. In the early morning of the 25th it was moved to its right (south), and by 11 A.M. was in position covering Nesle and extending south-eastward behind the 30th Divn and the right of the 20th Divn,<sup>1</sup> the right being at Moyencourt, where it was in touch with the French 62nd Division. The French official account says very little about the doings of the 22nd Division on this day, except that, "Towards 4 P.M. the 22nd Division lost Nesle and began to retreat". Thus, the French on either side of the 30th and 20th Divns retired, leaving the British flanks exposed, and then, as we have seen, these two divisions, in turn, conformed to the retreat. As they retired, they found the French 22nd Division on the line Ercheu—Billancourt with the French 62nd on the right of the 22nd from Campagne to Ercheu; but west of Billancourt there was an enormous gap. General Robillot had sent up what reinforcements he had: they amounted to only two groups of cyclists and the 1st Cuirassiers. The French account continues:

"The intervention of these small forces was without effect, the two French divisions, extended on a front of nine or ten miles, were unable to stop the German infantry, very superior in numbers and pushing energetically

<sup>1</sup> Boullaire, p. 248 and map.

" ahead through the breaches in our line ; the 62nd had " not yet received its artillery ; the 22nd insistently " demanded ammunition for its batteries, which were " poorly provided. The British artillery which was supporting our troops was nearly worn out ; the British infantry " was so tired and disorganized that haste had to be made " to get it out of the line.<sup>1</sup>

" At 7 P.M., therefore, as the enemy advance on both flanks was becoming more pronounced, General Robillot " ordered his two divisions to establish themselves on the line Catigny [on the canal, the left flank of the French " 10th Division]—Beaulieu—Bois de Champien—Solente " —Gruny—railway west of Liancourt." This signified a further retirement of some three miles.

At 6 P.M. General Fayolle (G.A.R.), bearing in mind General Pétain's instructions quoted above,<sup>2</sup> issued orders to General Humbert (Third Army)—but not to General Gough—which were passed on by him at 8 P.M. to Generals Pelle and Robillot. The heights dominating Noyon, with the Montagne de Porquéricourt, " as principal position " of defence ", and thence to Roye, were to be held as the main position, with an advanced position in front of it. Liaison with the British was to be on the line Roye—Nesle, which hardly conveyed any idea of preventing a gap. Unfortunately, " it was impossible to apply the instructions " of the commander of the Group of Armies and the Army " commander ", as Noyon had been lost and the Montagne de Porquéricourt abandoned to the enemy. At midnight, General Robillot's divisions began an unhindered retirement to the line defined in his 7 P.M. orders, namely, Catigny—Gruny. Profiting by the moonlight, the enemy soon followed, and " infiltrations were reported all along the " front. At 3 A.M. on the 26th the Germans, debouching " from the Bois de Champien, drove back the 307th and " 277th Infantry Regiments. . . . The 22nd and 62nd " Divisions fell back on the whole front except on the right, " which was reinforced by the 77th Division," part of that formation having just arrived. They fell back to the line indicated in General Fayolle's order, Catigny—Roye, thus increasing the gap between the French and the British, and swinging open, as it were, the southern half of the door for the Germans to enter and separate the Allies.

<sup>1</sup> The 30th Divn and right and centre of the 20th remained in position after the French on either side had retired.

<sup>2</sup> See pages 448-50.

Lieut.-General Maxse (XVIII. Corps) had been informed during the morning that, in the event of a withdrawal becoming necessary, the direction of the French retirement would be south-west towards Roye. It was evident that if the 20th Divn remained with the French and also retired south-west, the gap between the XVIII. and XIX. Corps already three miles wide, measured from Robillot's left at Nesle, would be still further increased and would offer an opportunity to the enemy to separate the bulk of the British Army from the French. To guard, as far as he could, against such a disaster, about which the French seemed to care little, Lieut.-General Maxse, at 3 P.M. (his headquarters were at Roye until 5 P.M. when they were transferred to Moreuil, 12 miles to the west), directed Major-General Douglas Smith that, in the event of a retirement of the French, the 20th Divn should retreat with them to the neighbourhood of Roye, assemble there and then move north-westward to the le Quesnoy area (9 miles north-west of Roye) to fill the gap. It was to be covered during the latter march by the 61st Bde, which was ordered to concentrate at Avricourt (4 miles south-east of Roye) for the purpose.

The French offered no objection to this arrangement, and it was thus settled that when the French 22nd Division fell back at midnight, the 20th should march at the same hour. Covered by a rear guard, it moved accordingly, and, although the roads to Roye were filled with a "solid "mass of exhausted and retreating troops", the 59th and 60th Bdes, with all three brigades (less two battalions absent on other duties) of the 61st Divn, were collected at Roye and the area immediately north-east of the town before daylight on the 26th. The 30th Divn was, as we have seen, already assembling 7 miles west-north-west of Roye, while the 36th Divn, which had first been brought to Avricourt, was also ordered to an area five miles west of Roye, and began to arrive there between midnight and 2 A.M. Thus the four divisions of the XVIII. Corps (less artillery), certainly not stronger in infantry than a thousand men each, were assembled at daybreak, and were available to fill any gap between the French and the XIX. Corps, at the order of the corps commander. The French, however, retained both the heavy and the field artillery which had acted with them all day, the 306th and 307th Brigades R.F.A. narrowly escaping capture after remaining in action at Gruny until 8 P.M. Only the four batteries of heavy

howitzers (8, 9·2 and 12-inch) were taken out of the line and sent back to the gun park at Longueau near Amiens.

### *XIX. Corps*

The postponement of the zero hour and the failure of the French to counter-attack entirely upset the plans of Lieut.-General Sir H. Watts, and contributed largely to the abandonment of the line of the Somme. The position of the XIX. Corps was not an unfavourable one, and much digging had been done during the night by the engineers, pioneers and infantry parties to improve it. There were good positions for the artillery. With the 23rd Brigade (8th Division) and the 66th and 89th Divns, the corps held the line of the Somme from south of St. Christ round to Hem. Here the left, thrown back 5 miles to form a defensive flank, was still a mile in front of the right of the VII. Corps (now in the Third Army), on the northern bank. The right, the 8th Division (less one brigade, but plus one brigade of the 50th Divn) was thrown back, and there was also a mile gap between it and the XVIII. Corps. On the extreme left, on the lower course of the Somme, was what remained of the 16th Divn. In rear, on a second position, Hattencourt—Frise, were the 24th and the 50th Divns, the latter less one brigade.

In consequence of the advance of the enemy, orders were issued at 11 A.M. for all the heavy artillery, beginning on the right, to fall back to cover the second position, which was to be the limit for the day if a retirement became necessary. The weakness of the front position, apart from its open flanks, lay in the fact that the Somme was very low; so while the few troops available for its defence were concentrated with a view to opposing the passage of the river by the bridges and causeways, the enemy had utilized his two days' halt upon the river line to discover crossing places for small parties at various intermediate points.

The 24th Divn (Major-General A. C. Daly), which, with a portion of the 8th Division, had been detailed to take part in the counter-attack with the French, had originally been ordered by the corps to be in position in front of Dreslincourt at 5.30 A.M., so as to close the gap between the XVIII. and XIX. Corps, and be ready to advance at 6 A.M. In view of the hour of attack being fixed by General Robillot at 8 A.M., the 24th Divn—no doubt with the purpose of giving the men as much rest as possible—was

directed by the corps, at 4.35 A.M., to advance from its night position at six o'clock, so that it might be in its "jumping-off" position at 8 A.M. All preparations were made, so that on receiving the word "Move" the brigades would be set in motion. The divisional order, issued at 4.55 A.M., had given "immediately behind Mesnil le "Petit" as the place where touch would be made with the French 22nd Division, and "a thousand yards "west of Potte", as the point of junction with the 8th Division.

As we already know, the Germans, who were already in Potte, attacked shortly before 8 A.M., after an hour's bombardment, and had anticipated the counter-attack. In the mist, large enemy parties were not fired on, since it was imagined they must be Frenchmen who had gained a start: for the same reason, the artillery at first did not shell them. When the 24th Divn (73rd and 17th Bdes in front and the 72nd in reserve) did advance it found the enemy already in possession of Dreslincourt, and came under heavy machine-gun fire from the south-east; for, as the French had not appeared, the right flank was exposed. Any illusions about help coming from that side were soon dispelled: a staff officer of the 73rd Bde, sent to gain touch with the French, was definitely informed, when he discovered them, that they did not intend to counter-attack. Nevertheless, in spite of the vigorous German attack, the 24th Divn held the enemy in check throughout the morning and inflicted heavy casualties. It was not until after 1 P.M., when, as will be related, the enemy was in Pertain on the north and both flanks were turned —after the pioneers (12/Sherwood Foresters) had been brought up on the left—that divisional orders for a withdrawal were given. The 73rd Bde was to retire to its original position north of Fonchette; the 17th Bde, north of the 73rd, to fall back to a line immediately east of Chaulnes, behind the second position. This movement could not be avoided, for Omiécourt, included in that position, was already under bombardment. The retirement was carried out during the afternoon, when the 72nd Bde, which had been moved towards the right of the line, took position on the right of the 73rd Bde near Hatten-court.

In the 8th Division (Major-General W. C. G. Heneker), the 25th and 24th Brigades had been ordered to find troops for the counter-attack which was to recapture the

west bank of the Somme at Epénancourt, and for a thousand yards south of that village. The 24th Brigade was able to use the two battalions of the 150th Bde and the 15th Field Company R.E. (50th Divn), which had been placed under its orders, and was therefore under no necessity to thin its front line. The 25th, having no such reserve, was compelled to comb out 240 men from its own battalions, and so, being left very weak, was reinforced by the 490th Field Company R.E., and a company of divisional pioneers (22/Durham L.I.). The counter-attack troops assembled at Licourt. As early as 7 A.M., during the enemy bombardment, Germans began bombing up the communication trench of their old position, abandoned in 1917, towards the 25th Brigade. When, about 8 A.M., the enemy infantry advanced, the thinly held British line, with its right flank open, could not withstand the assault, and fell back on Pertain. On the eastern side of the village a stand was made until 11 A.M., when the 25th Brigade slipped sideways and joined the 17th Bde near Dreslincourt, retiring with it later into support north-east of Chaulnes.

The 24th Brigade (with one battalion of the 150th) held the line from in front of Licourt, to St. Christ (inclusive). Exposed by the retirement of the 25th, and now subjected to attacks on the right flank and in front, the right and centre of the brigade were gradually compelled to retire so far that the counter-attack troops assembled in and north of Licourt soon became involved in the fight. A stout resistance was offered, which left two companies of the 1/4th and 1/5th Green Howards with few survivors, but the line was gradually pressed back, until by 10.30 A.M. Licourt was in the hands of the Germans. The 24th Brigade (less its left battalion) and the 150th Bde then retired north-westwards, the 24th to the railway behind Marchelepot—where it found the 151st Bde (less one battalion with the 66th Divn)—and the 150th to a position covering Misery. The left of the 24th Brigade, the 1/Sherwood Foresters, still held the river bank at and around St. Christ, and it formed a right defensive flank when its sister battalions retired.

Thus in the course of the afternoon the 24th Brigade and 151st and 150th Bdes (all under Br.-General R. Haig of the 24th) had withdrawn to a new position extending from Hyencourt le Grand, where they were in touch with the left of the 24th Divn, along the railway to a point in front of Misery. Between this point and the defensive

flank of the 1/Sherwood Foresters at St. Christ there was a gap. To make matters worse, about 5 P.M. the 150th Bde was ordered back to the line of the railway behind Misery, thereby increasing the gap; so the fortunes of the 1/Sherwood Foresters became bound up with those of the 23rd Brigade on its left. The latter brigade was now holding the river line with the 2/Devonshire, 2/Middlesex and 1/7th Durham L.I. (Pioneers of the 50th Divn).

In the mist, about 7 A.M., the Germans had rushed the post of the 2/Middlesex on Eterpigny bridge: at once re-established, it was lost and regained for the second and then for the third time. At the same hour the enemy managed to cross north of the bridge and drive back the 1/7th Durham L.I., which retired to the higher ground half a mile east of Barleux. He then entered Eterpigny from the north, and the left company of the Middlesex, still holding on, was completely surrounded. Only its commander, Captain A. M. Toye, with ten men, managed to fight his way out. Then, collecting seventy men of the 1/7th Durham L.I., he barred the Villers Carbonnel—Eterpigny road until reinforcements came from the brigade reserve, the 2/West Yorkshire.<sup>1</sup> But a counter-attack made by two companies of this battalion was brought to a complete standstill by fire as it reached the edge of the heights overlooking the river valley.

Meanwhile the enemy, now able to cross at Eterpigny, was making progress up the little valley towards Barleux, so that the 66th Divn (using two battalions of the 149th Bde of the 50th Divn) formed a defensive flank on the north, whilst, to the south, the 23rd Brigade (2/Devonshire and the rest of the 2/Middlesex) was holding out not only on the Villers Carbonnel—Eterpigny road, but along the Somme. The fighting at Brie bridge was specially severe, as the attack was pressed up the west bank from Eterpigny, as well as in front; but in spite of these strenuous efforts the enemy's further advance was checked.

To the north, the 66th Divn was also strongly attacked. The enemy, utilizing houses and gardens to get up close under cover, endeavoured to enlarge the small bridgehead which he had secured on the previous evening immediately to the south of Péronne. Eventually, about 1 P.M., under a barrage of artillery, trench mortars and machine guns, he drove the 197th and 199th Bdes from the canal bank to

<sup>1</sup> For this and other actions, Captain Toye was awarded the V.C.

the higher ground on the edge of the Somme valley.<sup>1</sup> Lower down at Biaches the 198th Bde, or what was left of it, chiefly 2/5th East Lancashire, found some cover in the houses where the river was more difficult to cross, and maintained its position. Further down again, the 39th Divn was not attacked by infantry, and was able to do great execution with guns and rifles on German troops, some within a thousand yards, advancing north of the Somme against the VII. Corps front. In consequence of this advance, towards noon the left flank was extended to Frise.

Throughout the afternoon, therefore, the XIX. Corps more or less managed to hold its own; but about 6 P.M. an order to retire reached the troops. Some hours earlier it had become obvious to Lieut.-General Watts that his corps could not maintain its forward position without grave danger of isolation. The French, under General Robillot, and the XVIII. Corps had not only failed to counter-attack as arranged, but had withdrawn south-westwards, increasing the gap on the right, so that this flank had already been swung back. On the left, the VII. Corps, whose line at dawn already lay some six miles in rear of the general front of the XIX. Corps on the Somme, was being driven back. After discussion on the telephone with General Gough, who during the day had visited all his corps headquarters and was fully cognisant of the situation, Lieut.-General Watts, having previously warned his divisional commanders by telephone, at 4.15 P.M. issued orders for a withdrawal. It was to begin as soon as it was dark, to the second position Hattencourt—Chaulnes—Ablaincourt—Estrées—Frise, which, except on the right, was already partially prepared.

The 24th Divn was by this time beginning to fall back to this line. The 8th Division (and the brigades of the 50th Divn with it), its right on the line Hyencourt—Misery and its left still on or near the Somme, began to retire at 7 P.M. on orders issued at 6 P.M. in confirmation of verbal instructions already given. The Sherwood Foresters, led by Lieut.-Colonel R. F. Moore, and carrying their wounded

<sup>1</sup> The attack was made by the 208th Division with artillery (2 field artillery regiments and 2 heavy batteries) "in a great half circle" around Biaches (Goes, p. 127). The capture of the village, according to German accounts, brought about the fall of the Somme line, as the Germans from that point worked southwards to Eterpigny. British accounts show that they had crossed north of Eterpigny earlier than 1 P.M., that is, before the fall of Biaches.

with them, rushed the enemy behind them and reached Misery, eventually rejoining their own brigade in the new line.

The remnants of the 25th Bde had already gone back with the 17th Bde of the 24th Divn ; the 24th—and the 150th<sup>1</sup> and 151st Bdes with it—began to retire about 8 P.M. without much interference from the enemy, but its rear guard of the 1/8th Durham L.I., covering the left flank, had to fight most of the way back, and did not reach the new line until 8 A.M. on the 26th. In the 23rd Brigade, the 2/Devonshire, with the 2/West Yorkshire and 2nd Field Company R.E., having held out all day, managed to get away ; but, on reaching Misery found the enemy in occupation and charged through with the bayonet. The 2/Middlesex received the order for retirement too late, except the greater part of one company, which withdrew with the Devonshire ; assailed at Brie in front and on its left flank, but acting on the orders to resist to the end, nearly three-quarters of the battalion had fallen at their posts. Covered by a small rear guard under Lieut.-Colonel C. A. S. Page the remainder escaped up an old communication trench, and then, after firing five rounds rapid, the rear guard followed. Three minutes afterwards the Germans reached the Middlesex trenches and fired lights to signal their presence.<sup>2</sup>

On the 66th Divn front, the 197th and 199th Bdes, covered by the 149th (50th Divn) began to withdraw at 7.30 P.M. and were not seriously interrupted by the enemy. But the 198th, on the left, when its turn came to retire, found the enemy had infiltrated round its right ; in conjunction with the 1/1st Cambridgeshire (118th Bde) which lay alongside of it, it was forced to fight a sharp rear-guard action on the high ground above Biaches in order to extricate itself. The remainder of the 39th Divn was not in close touch with the enemy, and fell back without interference. The two battalions of the 116th Bde which had fought on the 24th north of the Somme rejoined during the day and were placed in divisional reserve.

<sup>1</sup> On reaching the new line, the 150th Bde was formed into a composite battalion.

<sup>2</sup> "Regt. No. 91", p. 351, which was in an old German trench between St. Christ and Brie, says : "For two days the enemy defended to the last the two crossing places at Brie and St. Christ. Only in the afternoon of the 25th, severely pressed from the north and south, did they evacuate the field in front of our sector." The 113th Division attacked at St. Christ, the 19th at Brie, and their success "cost them much blood". Goes, p. 128.

The 16th Divn, extended along the Somme beyond the 39th Divn, found itself in a curious predicament. Its original orders had been to face south to prevent the enemy from molesting the right flank of the Third Army ; as a result of the retreat of the VII. Corps westward, however, it received orders at 2 P.M. to face north to protect the left flank of the Fifth Army.

On the right of the 8th Division, the withdrawal of the batteries had begun in the morning ; on its left and along the 66th Divn front, the artillery was able to maintain its position until about 6 P.M. On the 39th Divn front, the withdrawal was not carried out until after dark, about 7.30 P.M.

In order to deceive the enemy as to the extent of the retirement, in the 66th Divn two single 18-pdrs. were sent forward during the night to demonstrate in front of the outposts. In the 8th Division, also, two guns from each 18-pdr. battery and a howitzer of the XLV. Brigade R.F.A., were sent out to fire on the bridges of St. Christ and Brie ; but, in the dark they suddenly came under machine-gun fire, and had to abandon six out of the seven guns, raising the total of guns lost by the corps during the day to eight.

Before dawn on the 26th, the whole of the XIX. Corps was in the new position, except the heavy artillery, which was ordered, at 8.30 P.M. on the 25th, to withdraw so as to cover the Rouvroy—Rosières—Proyart line, four miles to the west of the Hattencourt—Frise position. To this line a further retirement was contemplated, in view of the fact that on the right there was only precarious connection with the French, while on the left the line of the Third Army at Bray was four miles behind the flank of the XIX. Corps at Frise. At 11.30 P.M., with the authority of the Fifth Army, Lieut.-General Watts warned the divisional commanders that if severely pressed on the 26th, they should fall back on the Rouvroy—Proyart—Froissy line. An improvised R.E. battalion, 800 strong, and the 15th, 20th and 22nd Entrenching Battalions were ordered to move at 6 A.M. on the 26th to begin work on this line.

The XIX. corps was the only corps of the Fifth Army now in the front line. Of the III., two divisions were with the French south of the Oise, and one, the 14th, in reserve under the French V. Corps ; the four divisions of the XVIII. Corps, each very weak and without artillery, were assembled behind the left of General Robillot's corps north-west of Roye.

THIRD ARMY<sup>1</sup>

**Map 11.** The morning of the 25th March found the troops of the V. and IV. Corps in a far from good fighting condition: they had been engaged in hard combats on the 24th, and during the night there had been a long retirement in some confusion across the devastated area.

The whole of the Third Army had swung back, pivoting on its left, so that, although the VI. and XVII. Corps were little behind their positions of the 21st March, the right of the V. Corps had retired seventeen miles. The new line, consisting partly of old trenches and partly of shallow ones dug by the men themselves, started at Cirlu on the Somme and ran past places well known in the battle of the Somme, the Bazentins and High Wood, and then extended due north towards Arras. It was, for the most part, continuous, but broken and irregular in the centre where some parts were in advance of others; and there were actually many gaps. The IV. Corps, for instance, was not in touch with the corps on either side. Further, the men of the right and centre corps (excluding the recently arrived 42nd Division) were almost exhausted owing to hunger and prolonged lack of sleep.

They were not to get much respite on the 25th, for there was another long retirement in prospect. An officer has recorded: "What remains in my memory of this "day is the constant taking up of new positions, followed "by constant orders to retire, terrible blocks on the roads, "inability to find anyone anywhere; by exceeding good "luck almost complete freedom from shelling, a complete "absence of food of any kind except what could be picked "up from abandoned dumps". Casualties, particularly among the officers, had been heavy, battalions were reduced in many cases to mere cadres, but men who had lost their units attached themselves to the nearest formed body.<sup>2</sup> Against this disorganization had to be set the certainty

<sup>1</sup> The VII. Corps (less the 16th and 39th Divns) of the Fifth Army belonged, as from 4 A.M., to General Byng's command, and the Somme was henceforth the boundary between the two Armies. See page 418.

<sup>2</sup> The state of the 26th Bde (9th Divn) will give some idea of the disorganization. The brigade had become split up into four parties on the 24th. The main force had spent the night of the 24th/25th in Montauban, but "The Black Watch Force", consisting of part of the 8/Black Watch with stragglers from the 7/Seaforts and 5/Camerons, in all about 300 men, under Lieut.-Colonel R. W. Hadow, spent the night at Albert, moving on the 25th to Corbie. "The Cameron Force (first part)", about 150 strong, joined the 52nd Bde (17th Divn), and during the night held a line 600 yards

that the Germans had suffered very heavily ; that their progress across the devastated area had grown more and more arduous ; and that they were advancing with the greatest deliberation.

The number of false reports which obtained circulation, some of them too absurd for belief, particularly in the IV. Corps, caused serious trouble throughout the 25th. Thus during the night of the 24th/25th came reports that Sapignies and Behagnies had fallen ; on the following morning the rumour spread that German cavalry was coming out of Bapaume.

Sir Douglas Haig did not relinquish his plan of operations, outlined to General Byng on the 24th, in consequence of the visit of General Pétain, when the latter expressed the intention of directing General Fayolle, in command of the G.A.R. on the British right, to fall back south-westwards on Beauvais in order to cover Paris. The Field-Marshal still assumed that the French Commander-in-Chief would, under orders of his Government, even if not of his own free will, send strong forces to the vicinity of Amiens to ensure the continued junction of the Allied Armies.

Written orders, in confirmation of Sir Douglas Haig's verbal instructions, were issued from G.H.Q. during the afternoon of the 25th.<sup>1</sup> To gain time for the arrival of the French, in the event of enemy pressure continuing, the Third Army was to fall back to the line of the Ancre and the old British front of July 1916, approximately Bray sur Somme—Albert—Beaumont—Hamel—Gommecourt—Arras, and any reserves were to occupy this line forthwith : two more divisions<sup>2</sup> were placed at the disposal of the Third Army : the First Army was to concentrate all available troops on its southern flank ready to assist by offensive action south and south-east of Arras. Already at 11.20 P.M. on the previous evening, G.H.Q. had placed the Cavalry Corps under the Third Army, which thereupon ordered its concentration in the valley of the Ancre south of the Amiens—Albert road, with the exception of the 1st Cavalry Division,

south-east of Martinpuich. This party did not rejoin the 9th Divn until the morning of the 26th. "The Cameron Force (second part)", about 180 strong, arrived in Albert about 8 A.M. on the 25th, after having fought alongside the pioneers of the 47th Divn during the 24th. It joined Hadow's party.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 29.

<sup>2</sup> The 4th Australian Division (less artillery), arriving on the 25th, in the Basseux area (about 7 miles south-west of Arras) ; the 3rd Australian Division due to begin concentrating about Mondicourt (16 miles south-west of Arras) on the 26th.

which was to remain with the VII. Corps. This order was not carried out; at 8.30 P.M. on the 25th, the Third Army ordered the dismounted portion (the 1st Dismounted Brigade) of the 1st Cavalry Division to be withdrawn from the front line of the VII. Corps and to rejoin its horses, then at Morlancourt (4 miles west of Bray); but, owing to the critical situation it remained with that corps. The 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions, for similar reasons, remained with the III. Corps of the Fifth Army.

The 12th and New Zealand Divisions, which had been allotted to the Third Army, were kept for the present in Army reserve.<sup>1</sup>

Major-General J. M. Salmond rendered important assistance on this day by collecting over a hundred aeroplanes from the scouting and the bombing squadrons of G.H.Q. and the First Army, in order to assist the III. Brigade R.F.C. working with the Third Army. By an order issued at 11.5 A.M., the squadrons were "to bomb "and shoot up everything they can see on the enemy's "side of the line [north to south] Grévillers [just west of "Bapaume]—Martinpuich—Maricourt [that is, on the "front of the VII., V. and IV. Corps]. Very low flying "is essential. All risks to be taken." As a result, machines of all kinds were flown over the enemy at low heights, pilots expending all their ammunition and bombs on the plentiful targets offered to them, only to return for fresh loads and repeat the process. Their determined efforts did much to discourage and hold back the enemy advance by impeding the movement of his reserves.<sup>2</sup> As the activities of the R.F.C. were mainly

<sup>1</sup> The 12th Division was released to the VII. Corps at midday to strengthen the left of that corps and the right of the V. Corps, with instructions to occupy a line from the Somme at Bray northwards through Fricourt and Contalmaison to Pozières. It was transferred to the V. Corps at 7.40 P.M., and its movements will be described in the narratives of the VII. and V. Corps.

The New Zealand Division was at first directed to concentrate in the Ancre valley under the VII. Corps. In the evening matters became critical, and it was ordered to march by the Hedaувille—Mailly Maillet—Puisieux road and come under the IV. Corps. It was intended to fill a gap reported to exist between Hamel and Puisieux au Mont, that is, between the left of the 2nd Divn and the right of the IV. Corps. Units were to move forward independently as soon as they arrived in the Baizieux area,  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles west of the position originally laid down for concentration. As a matter of fact, the 2nd Divn (V. Corps) held from Hamel northward as far as Auchonvillers.

<sup>2</sup> German regimental histories tell of groups of 15, 25, 30 machines being over them and Goes (p. 124), states that "British aviators circled and "circled round the troops like a swarm of angry hornets".

directed against ground targets little distant bombing was undertaken ; nevertheless a few raids took place against hutments and stations, while at night bombing attacks were made on Bapaume and Péronne with the object of dislocating traffic. Some concentrations of troops just west of Bapaume were bombed at dawn on the 26th.

### *VII. Corps*

The VII. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir W. N. Congreve), on the line Cury (on the Somme)—Montauban, had had twelve hours' hard fighting on the previous day. It was now reduced to the 9th and 21st Divns and the 35th Division, with the 1st Dismounted Brigade under Br.-General D'A. Legard. The 35th Division was more or less fresh, but the two others were much battered—the S. African Bde having been reorganized as a composite battalion.<sup>1</sup>

Touch had not been established on the left with the V. Corps, although that formation had sent the 51st Bde to fill the 1½-mile gap between the two corps. The 51st arrived towards 4.30 A.M., when it became obvious that its numbers, barely six hundred all told, were insufficient for the purpose. The VII. Corps, therefore, used part of the 1st Dismounted Brigade with other troops to form a defensive flank, but throughout the day the gap proved a source of grave anxiety, as Germans could be seen streaming past into Mametz Wood. The attacks, however, came not from the flank but from the front, where undismayed by the danger of envelopment, the 35th Division (Major-General G. McK. Franks) and its attendant detachments, put up a magnificent fight against at least five German

<sup>1</sup> In the front line of 6,000 yards were the 105th and 106th Brigades and a battalion of Hunt's Force ; in the second, 8 battalions of Hunt's Force and the 18/Highland L.I. (106th Brigade). The defensive flank on the left was held by 2 regiments of the 1st Dismounted Brigade, to which was soon added the main part of the 26th Bde. The rest of the 1st Dismounted Brigade, the 104th Brigade, the 27th Bde, and 3 battalions of Hunt's Force were in reserve. The 21st Divn (less artillery) was reorganizing near Suzanne behind the right ; this reorganization was completed during the afternoon. At 4 P.M. the division was ordered to provide men for a composite brigade of 1,500 all ranks and 8 machine guns, to be known as " Headlam's Force ", under Br.-General H. R. Headlam, 64th Bde. At 5.30 P.M. this force was ordered to support the 35th Division, and arrived at Maricourt about 7 P.M. The rest of the infantry of the 21st Divn was ordered to go back to Chipilly, on the Somme, 7 miles below Suzanne.

divisions.<sup>1</sup> It was a struggle worthy to be related at length, but the briefest outline must suffice.

At 7.45 A.M. the enemy opened a heavy barrage, followed by a determined attack in several lines against the whole front and the left flank. The outpost line was driven in, and part of Bois Favière was lost ; but a brilliant counter-attack organized by Lieut.-Colonel W. H. Anderson (12/Highland L.I.) recovered the lost ground, capturing 12 machine guns and 70 prisoners.<sup>2</sup> The left flank was slightly driven in, and was therefore reinforced by the 19/Northumberland Fusiliers (Pioneers). This fighting continued until 10 A.M., when the 105th Brigade, on the right, began to suffer such losses from artillery fire that the battalions withdrew to the second line, and the composite battalion of Hunt's Force, which was short of officers, fell back to Maricourt, where it was rallied by the 203rd Field Company R.E. and settled down between the 17th and 18/Lancashire Fusiliers (104th Brigade) in the reserve line.

At 11 A.M. another fierce attack was made on the left, but the dismounted cavalrymen and the infantry with them, held on at Montauban, so that for the rest of the day Br.-General Legard could report the situation as " quite satisfactory ". To escape envelopment, however, the 12/H.L.I. was ordered back, and it appeared as though the Germans would break through at Maricourt. The staffs of the 104th and 105th Brigades then organized a counter-attack of two companies from each brigade, and, after a three hours' struggle, the front was restored. At 2.30 P.M. the Germans renewed the attack against the left front and flank. They failed, but came on again at 4.30 P.M., making their main effort at the point of junction of the 18/Highland L.I. and the 1st Dismounted Brigade, just south of Bernafay Wood.

Matters now became critical, until a counter-attack of the 19/Durham L.I. restored the situation. This battalion, which had been sent up at midday by Lieut.-Colonel L. M. Stevens (temporarily commanding the 104th Brigade) to

<sup>1</sup> *1st, 25th, 199th, 9th Reserve, and Marine Divisions*, four of which were originally in second line. "They could not get through. . . . They suffered such severe losses, particularly in officers, that they could advance their line very little". The *54th Reserve Division* pushed through Mametz Wood. (Goes, pp. 126-7.)

<sup>2</sup> The wood was attacked by troops of the *199th Division* and their repulse is admitted. For this action, and for another on this day, equally gallant (see next page), during which he was killed, Lieut.-Colonel Anderson was awarded a posthumous V.C.

support the 106th Brigade, was ordered forward by Br.-General Pollard and not only recovered the lost ground but went a couple of hundred yards beyond it. Lieut.-Colonel Anderson of the 12/Highland L.I. seized the opportunity to clear away the Germans from Maricourt Wood, and from a timber yard which they had seized and packed with machine guns. As there were no other troops at hand, the whole of the 104th Brigade headquarters, cooks, clerks, servants and signallers were formed up on the right of the 12/Highland L.I. In this charge, which was entirely successful, Lieut.-Colonel Anderson was killed ; but the Germans were so shaken that they fell back down the slope for a thousand yards. At 7 P.M. reinforcements renewed the attack ; again the situation became serious and again it was restored by a counter-attack. Then the firing died down and this stubborn fight came to an end.

Meantime, the leading troops of the 12th Division, released from Third Army reserve at midday so as to be placed at the disposal of the VII. Corps, were moving up, with orders to fill the gap Montauban—Bazentin le Grand between the VII. and V. Corps. About 5.30 P.M. as they were nearing Albert, the division was broken up in accordance with VII. Corps orders issued at 5 P.M. The 37th Brigade, which was in front, was directed to go to Contalmaison, and its head reached La Boisselle about 6.30 P.M., where it came in touch with the 47th Divn. The 35th and 36th Brigades were sent to Maricourt and Montauban respectively, to come under orders of the 35th Division.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the VII. Corps had again held its own all day, and, reinforced, might be expected to stand fast.

### *V. Corps*

With its divisions all worn and reduced by the marching and fighting necessary to avoid being cut off in the Flesquières Salient, the V. Corps at daybreak presented a somewhat broken front to the enemy. The 2nd and 63rd Divns, in particular, owing to gas casualties, were probably more exhausted than any others. So tired and indifferent to safety precautions had the troops become that no patrolling seems

<sup>1</sup> The three Field Companies R.E., 69th, 70th and 87th, accompanied the 35th, 36th and 37th Brigades, respectively, and the 5/Northamptonshire (Pioneers) was with the 37th Brigade.

The artillery and transport of the 12th Division had not yet arrived. The infantry, engineers and pioneers had assembled two to five miles north-west of Albert during the morning, and had moved forward at 3 P.M.

to have been carried out ; touch was not gained between sections of the line, and the extent of the gaps which were ever growing on the flanks was not realized.

On the right was the 51st Bde (17th Divn), only six hundred strong, in the  $1\frac{1}{2}$ -mile gap between the left of the VII. Corps and the right of the 47th Divn, not in touch with the former and hardly so with the latter. The infantry, engineers and pioneers of the latter division, reduced to a few hundred men, were grouped in a deep re-entrant round and behind Bazentin le Petit. The 140th and 141st Bdes were in the front line, both under Br.-General H. B. P. L. Kennedy of the former brigade ; the 142nd Bde, with the 520th Field Company R.E. and pioneers, were north of Contalmaison—where Major-General Gorringe had his headquarters—in order to protect the left flank. In the village itself were men of various units. Between the 47th Divn and the right flank of the 63rd Divn, which rested on the southern end of High Wood, there came a gap of a full mile. In High Wood, as well as in Longueval village and in Delville Wood near by, there had been seen on the previous evening some patrols, if not stronger detachments, of the 79th *Reserve* and 183rd *Divisions*.

The 63rd Divn was fairly well established in a line along the spur which runs from High Wood to Ligny Thilloy, with a 50th Bde Group (17th Divn),<sup>1</sup> the 99th Bde, and the 10/D.C.L.I. (Pioneers of the 2nd Divn) on its left, and the 190th Bde and 52nd Bde in reserve. The pioneers had been called up from the reserve, which was near Eaucourt l'Abbaye, to cover the left, as there was said to be a gap three-quarters of a mile wide between the 63rd Divn and the right of the IV. Corps. Even as these troops arrived, their left became engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with Germans in the sunken road at Le Barque. The gap had been caused by the absence of the 5th and 6th Bdes of the 2nd Divn. Reduced to some seven hundred men, short of ammunition and not knowing where the third brigade, the 99th, might be, they had left the line just south-west of Ligny Thilloy about 2.30 A.M. by agreement between the two brigadiers, and finally halted for rest and food at Courcelette and Le Sars, on the Albert road, behind the 63rd Divn. To replenish rifle ammunition, officers and men searched for

<sup>1</sup> 77th Field Company R.E., 7/York & Lancaster (Pioneers) and some East Yorkshire ; about 250 men in all.

rounds dropped from pouches, until dumps were found on the Albert—Bapaume road.

The German attacks began as soon as it became light, and were at first tentative. For some time little more than a rifle duel took place, and some difficulty was found in getting the men, accustomed to the point-blank range of trench warfare, to put their rifle sights up to 800 yards. Then the offensive gradually increased in strength, fresh enemy troops coming up and passing over the front lines, which were lying down.<sup>1</sup> By 10 A.M. the fusillade had become general and vigorous, except on the front of the 51st Bde, the connecting link with the VII. Corps. Artillery then joined in. Still the troops of the V. Corps held their own, the 1/4th Bedfordshire being sent up from the 190th Bde to reinforce the right of the 63rd Divn, round which German patrols were moving.

Corps orders, telephoned at 9.30 A.M. from Lieut.-General Fanshawe's headquarters, which had been at Toutencourt (10 miles west of Albert) since the previous evening, now reached the divisions, directing that the general line Montauban—Bazentin le Grand—Martinpuich—Le Sars—Butte de Warlencourt, must be held. The 2nd Divn was to conform to the movements of the 19th Divn (IV. Corps) on its left, while the scattered 17th Divn took position as soon as possible around its 51st Bde between Montauban and Bazentin le Grand. It was, however, impressed on divisional commanders that, if forced back, no ground was to be given up without a struggle. The new line named by the corps, though slightly to the west of that on which the front then stood, conformed with the orders issued by the Third Army on the afternoon of the 24th.

By 10.30 A.M. arrangements for covering the withdrawal of the 63rd and 2nd Divns had been made. The reserve of the former division, the 190th Bde (less one battalion, the 2/R. Marines, which was the reserve of the 188th Bde), and the pioneers of the 63rd Divn were to proceed to the ridge which runs from the east of Pozières towards Courcelette; whilst the 5th and 6th Bdes, then resting, were met by Major-General C. E. Pereira, and directed to the Courcelette—Pys ridge, behind which the XXXVI. Brigade R.F.A. was already in position.

The retirement was in fact begun prematurely by the

<sup>1</sup> The 21st Reserve, 107th, 54th Reserve, 79th Reserve and 183rd Divisions attacked the V. Corps front.

little group of a few hundred men representing what had been the 47th Divn. As early as 6 A.M. Major-General Gorringe had warned his brigadiers that if further retirement should become necessary, the La Boisselle ridge just west of Contalmaison was to be the defensive line. After the repulse of the German attack, Br.-General Kennedy (140th and 141st Bdes) consulted with his battalion commanders at his headquarters in front of Contalmaison : he decided that a withdrawal must be made, first to the strong trench system situated on Contalmaison ridge, parallel and east of the Contalmaison—Martinpuch road. This course seemed inevitable in view of the enemy's strength and his endeavour to press past the right flank which lay open, out of touch with the 51st Bde.

The movement was only carried out with difficulty, the last company of the 1/21st London having to fight its way back with considerable casualties. A message from Major-General Gorringe, giving the location of the 51st Bde and instructions to connect with it round Mametz Wood, and adding the 142nd Bde to Br.-General Kennedy's command, came just too late to stop the retirement. Another message, moreover, sent by the V. Corps, urging him to hold fast on the Montauban—Bazentin le Grand—Martinpuch line, as ordered at 9.30 A.M., because a number of Tank Corps machine guns were already there in position and the 12th Division was approaching, did not arrive until 2 P.M. So the remnants of the infantry of the 47th Divn fell back towards Contalmaison, and finding the old trenches in good condition, established themselves strongly in them, the divisional artillery and an Army field artillery brigade being behind them. Seeing the 47th Divn retire, the 51st Bde, now "a mere "shadow", swung back its left in an endeavour to keep touch, at the same time bringing its right back a little to Montauban.

Meantime, the 63rd Divn, the 50th Bde Group and 99th Bde had continued to offer a strenuous resistance to the attack, which by 11 A.M. attained its full strength. On the right, the 47th Divn was disappearing, and the left flank was bare. In addition, the left of the 99th Bde was beginning to drop back in consequence of heavy attacks and of the retirement of the IV. Corps, which could be seen in progress. Towards noon, therefore, Major-General Lawrie, who was up at the front, ordered the withdrawal of the 63rd Divn. The proximity of the

enemy, the continuous machine-gun fire, the exhaustion of the men and the shortage of officers, rendered the operation difficult; nevertheless the volume of fire directed against the advancing Germans was so great that it made them, as one battalion diary states, "somewhat 'shy of taking risks'". The left wing, the 188th Bde and 50th Bde Group, moved first; the 189th Bde, with its right turned back, remained until nearly 1 P.M. Suffering heavy losses, the battalions, abandoning the Martinpuich sector, fell back to the Pozières—Courcelette line, west of the Albert—Bapaume road. After a pause to pick up ammunition, they were quickly reorganized, and found the 99th Bde on the north at Le Sars. Unfortunately, the 50th Bde Group and the 99th Bde could not maintain themselves in their new position, and made a further withdrawal through the 5th and 6th Bdes still on the Courcelette—Pys position.

Of the movements of the troops of the 17th Divn, it must suffice to relate that, in spite of many difficulties, Major-General Robertson, shortly after midday, managed to collect them, less the 50th Bde Group, round Fricourt, near the junction of the VII. and V. Corps: viz. the 52nd Bde, Cubbon's Composite Brigade,<sup>1</sup> with the 51st Bde to the east between Montauban and Mametz Wood.

Thus, by 2 P.M. the thin front of the V. Corps was disposed on the line Montauban—Mametz Wood, continuing with many a gap along the high ground Contalmaison—Pozières—Courcelette—Pys. Its field artillery was in close support. Thinking the British were on the run, the Germans now abandoned their cautious tactics, and rushed forward in thick masses without artillery support, thereby suffering losses which are said by witnesses to have been the heaviest of the March fighting.<sup>2</sup>

Weight of numbers and persistence, however, told their tale, and shortly after 2 P.M. there set in a further westward drift of the V. Corps. The 2nd Divn (less the 99th Bde) on the left could not maintain its position on

<sup>1</sup> This consisted of the rest of the 50th Bde (300 men), the rear echelons of all three brigades, and the 78th and 93rd Field Companies R.E., under Major J. F. Cubbon, of the 78th Field Company.

<sup>2</sup> Goes, p. 126, says of this sector, "the enemy resistance on the south became stouter and stouter, and less and less was the ground that the Germans gained. . . . Except a couple of infantry guns, no artillery. . . . "The artillery cannot cross the devastated area, the infantry must manage by itself. . . . No fresh division, or we could have pushed on to-day to the Ancre".

the Courcelette—Pys ridge. When the Germans in places came to within fifty yards, a retirement was begun, and the 5th and 6th Bdes worked down the slopes of the Ancre valley to near Miraumont, followed by the 99th Bde.<sup>1</sup> The bridge being destroyed, they crossed the Ancre lower down at Beaucourt. There they were met by divisional staff officers, and disposed in position on the high ground east of Beaumont Hamel, so as to defend the crossings of the Ancre and gain time for the reinforcing divisions to come up.

In the centre, the 68rd Divn was attacked unsuccessfully in front ; yet as the enemy was exploiting the gaps on either flank, Major-General Lawrie felt it necessary to order a retirement to the old German defences on Thiepval ridge. About 3 P.M. the division fell back methodically without great loss. It was covered by the 190th Bde, which executed two good counter-attacks near Pozières, and reached Thiepval about 5 P.M. In the new position, the artillery, now on the west bank of the Ancre, helped greatly to keep back the Germans.

The infantry of the 47th Divn, under Br.-General Kennedy, continued to hold on to their strong position on the Contalmaison ridge, whilst Major-General Gorringe collected all available details and placed them behind Contalmaison to cover any further retirement. He also ordered the 51st Bde, on his right, to fall back and prolong Br.-General Kennedy's right to Fricourt Wood (north of the village), and this was done about 4.30 P.M. Connection was now established with Cubbon's Composite Brigade, which then moved to fill the gap between it and the dismounted cavalry of the VII. Corps on the right. The 52nd Bde established itself west of Fricourt ready to counter-attack.

By this time the position of Kennedy's force (the infantry of the 47th Divn) was not so satisfactory, for it was being attacked at close quarters. At 6 P.M. it was

<sup>1</sup> During the retirement, the 17/Royal Fusiliers (6th Bde) put up a most gallant defence. The rear guard had halted on the Pys—Miraumont road to collect and reorganize. At this juncture, the commanding officer, Lieut.-Colonel S. V. P. Weston, who had with him 2 officers and 100 men, received a verbal message from the troops of the IV. Corps on his left that the Courcelette—Pys—Irles ridge was to be held at all costs. Lieut.-Colonel Weston thereupon strung out his men in shell holes along it, sending for one company of the 24/Royal Fusiliers (5th Bde), which had just passed through, to help him. The total force of only about two hundred men maintained its precarious position in spite of very violent attacks from front and both flanks until 4 P.M., when the few survivors, with their ammunition exhausted, fell back along the road to Miraumont.

reported to divisional headquarters that Pozières was in German hands, and that the 63rd Divn was retiring. Major-General Gorringe, therefore, ordered his details standing in the second line, behind Contalmaison, to form a defensive flank south of Pozières, while the 37th Brigade (12th Division), which had just arrived at La Boisselle, was instructed to counter-attack. At this juncture he heard that the 63rd Divn intended to retire west of the Ancre, whilst a reconnoitring party reported that Pozières was empty, although lights and flashes showed that there were Germans in the valley to the north-west of the village. In consequence, he cancelled the attack order, and made preparations for Kennedy's force to fall back to his second line. Before this move could be carried out, warning orders were received from the corps for a further retirement west of the Ancre.

At 6.30 p.m. Major-General Lawrie was able to report that the brigades of the 63rd Divn were in position, somewhat contracted, but covering, as a bridgehead, three crossings of the Ancre, from Authuille through the ruins of Thiepval to Hamel, with divisional headquarters at the northernmost bridge, and the artillery on the western bank. The division was not in touch with the 47th Divn, still on the Contalmaison position; on the other hand contact had been established on the left with the 2nd Divr, which was taking up a position astride the Beaucourt—Beaumont Hamel road. That division had the 50th Bde Group on its left; but this group was not in touch with any troops of the IV. Corps, whose movements will be given before the night retirement of the whole Third Army is related.

#### *IV. Corps*

The troops of the IV. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir G. M. Harper) having all been in action since the 21st, were exhausted and low in numbers, but still full of fight.<sup>1</sup> On this day the 42nd Division, which had come up on the

<sup>1</sup> The 19th Divn, for example, mustered only 2,200, of which the 58th Bde could claim only 270, with one battalion reduced to one junior subaltern and 29 other ranks. This does not mean that the rest were all casualties: many men had wandered and lost their units; these stragglers were collected and placed in back positions. Thus, several hundreds of men were assembled in the forenoon at Achiet le Petit by officers sent from 41st Divn headquarters, and used to block the gap east of the village towards Grévillers.

24th to relieve the 40th, was transferred, as arranged, from the VI. to the IV. Corps, and allotted the sector of the line previously held by the 40th. Then late in the afternoon, the 62nd Division (Major-General W. P. Braithwaite) also arrived from Arras to reinforce the IV. Corps, which thus received two fresh divisions.<sup>1</sup>

Opposed to the IV. Corps were no less than fifteen German divisions, actually the left half of the *Seventeenth Army*, for the boundary of the German *Second* and *Seventeenth Armies* coincided with that separating the V. and IV. Corps.<sup>2</sup> Owing to the German advance, the curve in the line which had existed round the Flesquieres Salient was straightened out, and there was no longer room for all the original divisions in the front line. So "a "battering ram of six divisions, led by the 39th and 24th "[from the second and third lines] had been formed on "the left wing". This circumstance affords a clue to the fortunes of the IV. Corps on this day: its right was thrust back by overwhelming numbers, and from facing east, with only a small space between it and the V. Corps, its divisions ended the day of the 25th March facing nearly south-east with a gap of over three miles separating it from its right-hand neighbour.<sup>3</sup>

The fighting of the IV. Corps, as of the V., on this day, began with German patrols trying to push into the gaps in the line, and there were many of these, although some were covered in rear by supporting troops. The battle then rose in intensity, as the re-entrant between the V. and IV. Corps was gradually forced open by the enemy in the hope

<sup>1</sup> Shortly after midnight, 24th/25th, when assembled round Arras and allotted to the XVII. Corps, the 62nd Division (its artillery and engineers had not arrived) was ordered by telegram to move (less one brigade) at once to Ayette (9 miles N.N.W. of Ervillers), where it would come under the orders of the IV. Corps. Having dumped kits and all superfluous stores in Arras, the 185th and 186th Brigades moved off about 3 A.M., and at Ayette were directed to push on to Bucquoy.

So great was the state of congestion on the roads, which were blocked with transport going in both directions, that the 185th Brigade was not concentrated at Bucquoy until noon—11 miles in 9 hours—and the 186th not until 2 P.M. They were followed by the 1/9th Durham L.I. (Pioneers). The two brigades were sent forward to Achiet le Petit, where they were in position by 5 P.M., but the pioneers remained to dig trenches at Bucquoy, where the 187th Brigade arrived during the afternoon.

<sup>2</sup> The divisions were: 24th, 39th, 4th, 3rd Guard, 20th, 195th, 1st Guard Reserve, 5th Bav., 17th, 16th Bav., 119th, 53rd Reserve and 24th Reserve, with the 111th and 239th against the sector taken over from the VI. Corps.

<sup>3</sup> Goes, p. 125, puts it, "Again it seemed to be the fate of Below's Army "to gain only a little ground by the heaviest sacrifices, but the left wing did "storm forward".

of bursting a breach in the British line; then it died down towards night.

On the right, the 19th Divn facing Bapaume, with the 51st in second line echeloned to the right rear, covering Warlencourt—Eaucourt—Loupart Wood, was not seriously attacked until nearly 9 A.M., when first the 56th Bde and then the 58th, swung back. The 57th maintained its hold on Grévillers until 11 A.M., when ammunition began to run short in consequence of continued heavy firing, and so all three brigades began retiring on the 51st Divn line. About the same time the medley of units of the 41st Divn, with some of the 25th, which were in line north of Bapaume and west of Favreuil with both flanks open, began to feel the German pressure into the gaps on either side. They were gradually forced to fall back on the 74th Bde (25th Divn) and the engineer companies of the 25th Divn which were in rear, covering Biefvillers.<sup>1</sup>

To the north also, in the sector of the 42nd Division, where the brigades of the 40th Divn still remained, there was fierce fighting from 7.30 A.M. onwards, especially around Sapignies and Béhagnies. At the first onset a company of the 12/East Surrey (122nd Bde) east of Sapignies was annihilated. Once, towards 10 A.M., the Germans reached the edge of this village, only to be overwhelmed by the fire of the 14/Argyll (120th Bde) which was holding it. No ground was lost in the line Sapignies—Béhagnies—Ervillers, except on the left, where, between Béhagnies and Ervillers, the 120th Bde, with the 177th (59th Divn) north of it, was forced back slightly by a surprise rush at 7.30 A.M. The enemy made no attempt to exploit this temporary advantage.<sup>2</sup>

The right flank of the 42nd Division was guarded by

<sup>1</sup> The 7th and 75th Bdes of the 25th Divn were in reserve north of Achiet le Grand.

<sup>2</sup> One German account ("Regt. No. 80", *17th Division*) claims that the village of Sapignies was captured by assault at 8.30 A.M. on 25th. "Bav. "Res. Regt. No. 21" (*16th Bav. Division* which was to pass through the *17th Division*) states, however: "Start at 6 A.M. . . . under heavy artillery "fire, against Sapignies—Bapaume road. While moving through the *17th Division* on the hills north-east of Favreuil the battalions were under "strong machine-gun fire. . . . At first the attack is checked, for Sapignies "is not yet captured. Another attack is made, and the southern end of "the village gained and 200 prisoners captured. The *89th Regiment* "attacking from the east also manages to get on. . . . But it was not until "the afternoon, after more men and heavy machine guns belonging to the "21st Regiment had been brought up that the west and northern edges of "Sapignies and also the southern edge of Behagnies were taken."

sending machine guns to it, and preparations were then made to relieve the tired units of other divisions in the sector extending from the northern outskirts of Béhagnies to the corps boundary north of Ervillers. Thus in the forenoon there seemed some prospect that the corps line would hold until the 62nd Division came up. That division, it was hoped, would take forward once more the 51st and 19th Divns, and might then catch the Germans in the pocket which they had made between the V. and IV. Corps towards Warlencourt—Eaucourt. Artillery and machine guns, in particular, were finding good targets, and the only truly alarming feature of the situation was that the ammunition dumps were getting empty and, owing to congestion on the roads, there was delay in refilling them.

The pressure of the German "battering ram" against the brigades of the 19th Divn, however, continued to drive them slowly north-westwards, until they eventually passed diagonally through the left of the 51st Divn east of Loupart Wood. Then, about 1.30 P.M., Major-General Jeffreys sent back the 56th and 58th Bdes—as he had warned them, at 11 A.M. he might do—to the Pys—Bihucourt line, covered by the 57th, which was to prolong the line of the 51st Divn northwards, and so endeavour to get touch with the 25th and 41st Divns.

The retirement of the 19th Divn brought the enemy infantry, which had been following up closely, supported by light machine guns, against the line of the 51st Divn. As usual, the frontal advance was checked, but about 1 P.M., the flanking movement on the right became very pronounced. Large numbers of Germans were seen moving north-west across the valley just west of the Butte de Warlencourt, making apparently for Pys, and, as we know, were soon afterwards attacking the 2nd Divn in the Courcellette—Pys position. The 154th Bde, on the right, was accordingly sent back, and it threw out a flank guard to the slopes north-west of Pys: about 2 P.M. the 152nd Bde, next to it, swung back to the southern edge of Loupart Wood where very fierce fighting, almost hand-to-hand, went on for the next hour. The 153rd and 57th Bdes remained on the eastern side of the wood.

In the end the 152nd and 153rd Bdes were compelled to fall back westwards to the high ground east of Irles, thus becoming separated from the 154th by the Pys valley. The 57th Bde (19th Divn), however, held on north of

Loupart Wood and offered most valuable resistance, preventing all attempts of the Germans to debouch from Grévillers for another hour; and, later, stopping their issue from Loupart Wood. Not until 4.30 P.M. did the 57th Bde make a short retirement northward to the ridge south-east of Achiet le Petit, there to offer further resistance. As divisional orders did not arrive, it fought on until 7 P.M., finally rejoining its sister brigades west of Achiet le Petit about 11 P.M.

Towards 2.30 P.M. Major-General Jeffreys, hearing that the Germans were in Courcelette, on the flank of the Pys—Bihucourt line, ordered all stragglers and details to be collected and set to dig in on the high ground on the west side of the Ancre from Achiet le Petit, south-westwards. On this position the 56th and 58th Bdes fell back about 5 P.M.: after some food and three hours' rest they were fully prepared for resistance. As it happened they were slightly in rear of the right flank of the 186th Brigade (62nd Division), which by now was on a line just south-east and south of Achiet le Petit.

The brigades of the 51st Divn near Pys and Irles had some remarkable targets in the shape of thick masses of Germans at long range; but, although the enemy was prevented from closing, he continued to outflank the defenders from the south.

Northward of the 19th and 51st Divns the fragments of the 25th and 41st, holding the line covering Biefvillers and northward, were turned on the right by the progress of the Germans about Grévillers, and soon after midday began to fall back on the Irles—Bihucourt ridge, where the 51st Divn and 122nd Bde (41st Divn) were already established. Bihucourt was lost soon after 1 P.M., and the position of the 122nd Bde north-east of the village was threatened. With a view to facilitating such a retirement as actually took place, Major-General Solly-Flood (42nd Division) had made preparations for a counter-attack to cover it. Three companies of the 127th Brigade and seven tanks of the 10th Battalion (from Logeast Wood) now came down on the northern flank of the Germans. Their action delayed the enemy and brought him to a stop for over an hour; he then contented himself with shelling and machine-gun fire, and did not debouch from Bihucourt, so that the various portions of the 51st, 19th, 25th and 41st Divns remained on the Irles—Bihucourt ridge. Only two of the seven tanks came out of action.

Meantime the 42nd Division, together with the 120th and 177th Bdes, had by their fire slowed down the German progress, making the enemy, as all could see, pay a heavy price for every yard of advance, the fire of the artillery being particularly effective. But, once the Germans were in Bihucourt, only a short distance from Achiet le Grand, which commanded the reverse slopes behind the line held by the 42nd Division, the position became dangerous. At the same time a very heavy enemy attack on Béhagnies in the centre was being made from Mory on the north-east. Ervillers was still held firmly by the 1/10th Manchester (126th Brigade) in spite of eight separate attacks made upon it, so orders were issued for a wheel back to the Gomiecourt—Ervillers ridge, pivoting on Ervillers village. The 125th Brigade and the 120th and 177th Bdes moved first, and were on the new position about 3.45 P.M. Later, the 127th prolonged the line to the right, while on the left the rest of the 126th, after a spirited counter-attack, maintained touch with Ervillers.

Thus, by about 5 P.M., the IV. Corps front from left to right was Ervillers—Gomiecourt—Achiet le Grand—Pys, facing south-east instead of east as at the beginning of the day. Its troops were much intermingled, especially on the left, where the units of the 120th Bde, 125th and 126th Brigades and the 177th Bde were jumbled together.

During the day, Lieut.-General Harper had tried to co-ordinate the movements of his divisions, although much handicapped by lack of signal communication, and even of mounted messengers. Now, at 5.15 P.M., being apparently much shaken by the plight of his old division, the 51st, in spite of the arrival of two brigades of the 62nd Division at Achiet le Petit, he issued orders for a withdrawal to a shortened front, to be followed by a reorganization. The two fresh divisions, the 62nd Division on the right and the 42nd Division on the left, were to hold a new front, in rear of the present one; it was to extend from south of Achiet le Petit to the northern boundary of the corps, six hundred yards south-east of Courcelles le Comte (2 miles west of Ervillers), west of the depression in which runs the Albert—Arras railway. Behind this screen, the tired 19th, 25th, 40th, 41st and 51st Divns were to withdraw, collect and reorganize at Hébuterne, Gommecourt and Fonquevillers, where they would guard the right flank. A subsequent order issued at 7.10 P.M. directed the 19th and 25th Divns to halt at Puisieux and

form a right defensive flank, in touch with the 62nd Division. On the right, the 186th and 185th Brigades of the 62nd Division were already on the line assigned to them ; but the 42nd Division, on the ridge north-east of Gomiecourt, was in advance of its allotted position. Major-General Solly-Flood decided to postpone the retirement of his brigades until 2 A.M. on the 26th.

Before the IV. Corps orders reached the 51st Divn, its brigades, outflanked on the south and brought near to breaking point by the ceaseless trials of the previous five days, retired first northwards towards Puisieux and then westwards, south of the position assigned to it, on Colin-camps and Sailly, which were reached at 11 P.M. The troops of the 19th, 25th, 40th and 41st Divns and the 177th Bde (relieved at 7.30 P.M. by troops of the 126th), fell back independently, greatly assisted by the action of low-flying aeroplanes. Shortly after nightfall the 62nd and 42nd Divisions were left as the troops nearest the Germans : the former on the line Achiet le Petit—Logeast Wood, and the latter, forward of it, on the line Achiet le Grand—Ervillers. Fortunately the enemy himself had been too exhausted to pursue, or the early stages of the retirement, especially that of the 51st Divn, might easily have been turned into a rout.

#### *VI. Corps*

In the VI. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir A. L. Haldane), the morning passed fairly quietly, except near Ervillers on the right ; the German artillery and aircraft were more active than on previous days, but there was no infantry attack. Half a mile away, in front of the Guards Division, considerable enemy movement was observed ; but many casualties were inflicted and all attempts at advance faded away under the British artillery fire. This, indeed, was so effective that the 4th Guards Brigade (31st Division) made a complaint that the infantry was not being given a fair chance with the rifle. Shortly after 1 P.M. the 93rd Brigade (31st Division) was attacked, but no Germans got near the VI. Corps line, and again the effort died down. Although Ervillers was still held, the enemy's entry into Sapignies and Béhagnies in the course of the afternoon, and the pressure from the south-east caused Lieut.-General Haldane some anxiety ; for his front was becoming a salient. At 4.15 P.M., therefore,

he issued warning orders for a retirement, according to which the 31st Division would move to the switch which ran from Gomiecourt to meet the Green Line east of Hamelincourt, while the Guards Division by a wheel back of its right was to continue the line from this point to the Battle Zone east of Boyelles. After reference to the Army commander, however, no executive order was issued for the time being.

#### GENERAL RETIREMENT OF THE THIRD ARMY

About 6 P.M., General Byng, who had been in communication all day by wire with his corps commanders, telephoned orders, somewhat ill-arranged, which in the main followed those of G.H.Q.<sup>1</sup> He confirmed them in writing at 7.40 P.M., with slight corrections at 8.45 and 10.5 P.M. These orders prescribed a general retirement beyond the Ancre, back to a new front which would run from Bray on the Somme, via Albert—Hamel—Puisieux—Bucquoy, to the left of the VI. Corps, which was to remain unchanged.<sup>2</sup> On this front a stand was to be made on the 26th.

In detail, the orders were to the following effect :—

The VII. Corps, leaving "a covering party" to hold the line Frise—Maricourt—Montauban as long as possible to "safeguard" the retirement of the Fifth Army, was to retire to the line Bray (inclusive)—Albert (exclusive); but it was to direct the 12th Division (transferred by the same order to the V. Corps) to proceed at once to hold the west side of the Ancre from Albert (inclusive) to Hamel (exclusive).<sup>3</sup>

The V. Corps was to retire through the 12th Division to the line Bouzincourt—Englebelmer.

The IV. Corps was to retire to the general line Puisieux—Bucquoy, regaining touch with the VI. Corps on the north. It was to do its best to cover the 4½-mile gap between its right and the V. Corps left at Hamel, and the New Zealand Division was placed at IV. Corps disposal for this purpose.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 29.

<sup>2</sup> Appendix 30.

<sup>3</sup> It will be recalled that the 12th Division was broken up, the 35th and 36th Brigades being with the 85th Division, and the 37th and pioneers, with the 47th Divn. One engineer field company was with each brigade; the artillery had not arrived.

<sup>4</sup> The New Zealand Division (Major-General Sir A. H. Russell), in Army reserve, had received orders to concentrate in the area Morlancourt—Dernancourt, 3 miles west of Bray on the Somme, as originally arranged;

The VI. Corps was to swing back pivoting on its left, to keep connection with the IV. Corps.

Such a night retirement from contact with the enemy, to be carried out at such short notice, with most of the troops on the verge of total exhaustion, on roads already congested with traffic, was bound to lead to confusion. To add to the troubles of the troops, the night was stormy with hail and sleet. Few who took part will forget the horrors of the all-night march by the light of burning dumps and aerodromes.

Major-General Franks (35th Division), who was now commanding the VII. Corps battle front (his own division, with the 35th and 36th Brigades of the 12th Division, Headlam's Detachment of the 21st Divn, and the 27th Bde of the 9th Divn), was at once informed by Lieut.-General Congreve (VII. Corps) of the Army orders by telephone; written confirmation was sent out at 8 P.M. The corps commander also added his ideas of how the retirement should be carried out. It was to begin forthwith; but rear guards were not to leave the main position which the VII. Corps had held all day before 2 A.M. on the 26th. An hour later Lieut.-General Congreve ordered Legard's Dismounted Brigade to rejoin the 1st Cavalry Division, which about midday had moved back to Bussy les Daours (6 miles east of Amiens).

In spite of many difficulties, the withdrawal, begun by the rearward echelons at 9.30 P.M., was successfully carried out, practically every unit but the rear guards being clear by one o'clock, except on the extreme left, near Montauban, where an attack about 1.45 A.M. caused delay, so that the rear guards did not get away until 2.45 A.M. The last section of the rear-guard artillery—its retirement had been carried out by echelons—remained firing until 3.30 A.M. without any covering infantry. It nevertheless withdrew unmolested, as the enemy was apparently misled by a continuation of the artillery fire and quite unaware of the retirement. On this new front, the right was held by Headlam's and Hunt's Forces, then came the 35th Division and the 27th Bde. The 35th and 36th Brigades (12th Division) were sent back and passed through Albert to take position north of the town, where, as we shall see,

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but only three brigade headquarters and parts of three battalions had arrived when, at 10 P.M., the above order was received at divisional headquarters at Ribemont (5 miles south-west of Albert).

the 37th joined them.<sup>1</sup> The dismounted brigade, when it reached Meaulte, was met by 40 empty G. S. wagons sent by the 9th Divn, and taken to Buire on the Ancre, where it found its horses and rested.

The left of the V. Corps was already across the Ancre when Lieut.-General Fanshawe received the Third Army orders for retirement; whereupon, at 11.55 P.M., he issued his own. To give the 12th Division time to take up position from Albert to Hamel, he directed the 47th and 63rd Divns to hold that line temporarily. Fortunately the enemy's efforts had slackened at dusk, and the divisions of the corps were able to reach and occupy the new position by about 7 A.M. on the 26th, more or less unmolested. The brigades of the 12th Division carried out the relief of the 47th Divn, which left them 16 machine guns, but it released only part of the 63rd, so that, as a continuation of the operation by daylight was impossible, the troops of the latter division remained mixed with those of the 37th Brigade in the sector between Aveluy Wood and Hamel. Touch was not obtained with the IV. Corps, so the 2nd Divn guarded the left flank in the old British front line from Hamel northwards, the leading troops of the New Zealand Division, as they arrived, forming up behind it.

The written Army orders, telephoned in advance, did not reach the IV. Corps until 10 P.M., and were communicated to divisional generals about 12.30 A.M. By that time the five fought-out divisions had already been withdrawn, and only the 42nd was in contact with the enemy, with the 62nd Division echeloned to its right rear near Achiet le Petit. The 62nd had only  $2\frac{1}{2}$  miles to drop back; yet so congested were the roads across the devastated area that the divisional orders did not reach its brigades until between 2 and 3 A.M.; thus some of the companies did not move until after daylight, and did not arrive on the Puisieux—Bucquoy—Ablainzevelle position until 7 or 8 A.M. on the 26th.

The brigades of the 42nd Division were faced with a more difficult task as the division was covering a wide front of nearly ten thousand yards and handicapped by the lack of signal communications. It was without horses,

<sup>1</sup> The 35th was met and turned back at Maricourt about 8.15 P.M., and reached Albert again about 1 A.M., having marched 15 miles.

The 36th was halted at Montauban at 9 P.M. and, after two hours' rest, returned to Albert between 1 and 2 A.M.

even for mounted officers, except a few which it had managed to borrow ; and, although some motor cyclists were available and invaluable, the bulk of the signal company had not arrived. Instructions had already been sent out by Major-General Solly-Flood for the withdrawal at 2 A.M. to the Achiet le Petit—Courcelles le Comte line, as ordered by the IV. Corps ; but it was not until three hours later that battalions got their final orders. By filling in ditches, clearing barbed wire, posting controls, and diverting traffic across country, the A. and Q. Staffs had more or less freed the roads. Meantime, at 9.30 P.M., half an hour after the VI. Corps troops on the left had retired, Ervillers was evacuated, and a withdrawal of a thousand yards made by the 1/10th Manchester, which had held it so long. Finally, at 10 P.M., the 125th Brigade, in the centre, had to repel a heavy attack, which fortunately came to an end about 1.30 A.M.

The retirement of the 42nd Division was carried out in three stages : first, to the line Achiet le Grand—Moyenville railway ; then to Logeast Wood—Courcelles, and finally to Bucquoy—Ablainzevelle, which was not reached until 10 A.M. on the 26th. There was a slight morning mist, but even as it grew light the enemy did not pursue and only came on cautiously. One column, indeed, was seen in the mist moving parallel about a mile to the south ; but generally speaking the Germans were content with a little artillery fire.

In the VI. Corps, Lieut.-General Haldane received the Third Army warning telephone message at 6.15 P.M. At the moment information—found on enquiry to be false—had just reached him that the Germans were working round his right flank and approaching Courcelles le Comte. He at once issued orders for retirement. Pivoting on the right of the 3rd Division, which was to stand fast in the Battle Zone, the 31st and Guards Divisions were to wheel back at once to Ablainzevelle (exclusive)—Moyenneville—Boisieux St. Marc ridge. As a preliminary, at 9 P.M., the 92nd Brigade on the right withdrew to take up a flank position ; but, owing to the delay in the receipt of orders and some air bombing by the enemy of the railway line which had to be crossed, it was daylight before the ridge was reached. It was then discovered that a gap had occurred between the 31st and Guards Divisions. The two battalions of the 93rd Brigade which should have occupied the space had been told to fall back by a staff

officer who was suffering from the effects of a shell which had burst near him.

Thus the Third Army managed during the night and early morning to reach more or less the new positions assigned to it, whilst its opponents, after enjoyment of the British dumps of food and canteen stores left behind, were having a good night's rest. But there was now a long gap of 4½ miles between the V. and IV. Corps, not to mention many local gaps along the whole line.

Having issued the important order for the retirement of the French left wing away from the British, on the night of the 24th/25th, General Pétain on the 25th gave only some instructions as regards the details of its execution:<sup>1</sup>

"he did not, in fact, receive any news in the course of "the day which was of a nature to cause him to modify "his conception of the battle; he continued to think "that the German attack in Champagne was immediately "impending. . . . In these circumstances, the General "Commanding-in-Chief did not wish to strip our Cham- "pagne front of reserves, and, besides, all the means of "transport by rail from the east towards the G.A.R. were "already being used to the utmost. He therefore did "nothing more than take some precautionary measures : "General de Castelnau was requested to hold another "division [48th] ready to be transported in case of neces- "sity by lorries on the 26th, to reinforce the G.A.N.; "General Franchet d'Espèrey received the order to warn "—without modifying their employment or mission— "three divisions [70th, 38th and 2nd Dismounted Cavalry] "and a corps headquarters [XXXIII.], that they might "be sent to reinforce the G.A.R"; but he was told that "the executive order would not be given before the enemy "attack expected in Champagne had been launched and "the result of it was known".

It is typical of the grave difficulties encountered when trying to conduct a war by means of a Council, that no meeting of the Allied leaders took place on the 25th March in response to Sir D. Haig's appeal. General Sir Henry Wilson, the C.I.G.S., arrived at G.H.Q. from London about 11 A.M. To him it was pointed out that the British, single-handed except for a few French divisions ill-supplied with ammunition and artillery, were confronting the whole offensive weight of the German Army, and that the French

<sup>1</sup> F.O.A. vi. (i.), pp. 308-9.

must be induced to come to their aid. At 4 p.m. Sir D. Haig went to Abbeville, by appointment, to meet M. Clemenceau, General Foch and Lord Milner, but only General Weygand, Foch's Chief of the Staff, appeared.<sup>1</sup> To him the British Commander-in-Chief gave a note for M. Clemenceau stating briefly that, in order to prevent a serious disaster, it was necessary for the French to act at once and concentrate as large a force as possible north of the Somme near Amiens.

Thus, after a considerable retirement by the Fifth Army in company with a few French divisions, and by the Third Army, the operations of the 25th March came to an end with every prospect of a further retirement, while little was being done to remedy the situation. So grave did it appear to General Pershing that, at 10 p.m., he visited General Pétain at Chantilly, to which place G.Q.G. had been shifted from Compiègne. When the French Commander-in-Chief told him that he "had few reserves "left", General Pershing said he would waive the idea of forming the American I. Corps, and that any American divisions that could be of service were at his disposal, but with the qualifying remark, that of course the U.S.A. would look forward eventually to their assembly under their own commander.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> M. Poincaré, M. Clemenceau, and Lord Milner (who had left London, at the Prime Minister's wish, on the 24th—before Sir D. Haig's message had been received—to visit Paris and find out the situation), had gone to a conference at General Pétain's headquarters at Compiègne, fixed for 5 p.m., where they were joined by General Foch, who had been warned at 11 a.m., and had then sent General Weygand to Abbeville. General Pétain described the situation and the measures which he was taking to meet it, in spite of the danger of an enemy attack in the Reims area. General Foch thought that more divisions should be thrown into the battle, even at the cost of running risks in other sectors. Lord Milner, on being asked how best co-operation could be established between the Allied Armies, replied that he could not express an opinion until he had seen Sir D. Haig. It was then settled to have a further meeting at Dury, the British Advanced G.H.Q., at 11 a.m. next day. In the course of the evening Sir H. Wilson made the proposal to Foch, that M. Clemenceau should be given the duty of ensuring the co-operation of the two Armies. This Foch rejected at once as "peu désirable". ("La Conférence de Doullens", by Paul Carpenter and Paul Rudet, pp. 42-9, and Lord Milner's Memorandum).

<sup>2</sup> Pershing Experiences, p. 317. At the moment "four combat divisions, equivalent in strength to eight French or British divisions "were available—the 1st and 2nd then in the line [on either side of the "St. Mihiel Salient] and the 26th and 42nd just withdrawn from line "after one month's trench warfare training. The last two divisions at "once began taking over quiet sectors to relieve divisions for the battle". Pershing, p. 32.

## NOTE

## THE GERMANS ON THE 25TH MARCH

"The sun of Germany's victory was high in the zenith on the "25th March" (Goes, p. 181), but the progress made did not come up to expectation (Foerster, p. 283). Although there had been steady advances on both wings, especially on the southern which was nearing Noyon and Roye, "in the centre on either side of the Somme, "the centre and left wing of the *Second Army* lagged not inconsiderably behind". The French divisions thrown hastily into the battle, however, had not managed to bring about a stand.

In these circumstances, the German Crown Prince ordered the *Seventh Army* (on the left of the *Eighteenth*) to push the position divisions of its right wing to the Ailette (which runs into the Oise between Noyon and Chauny), in order to fill the gap created by the advance of the *Eighteenth Army*. He also suggested to O.H.L. that, for the present, and until these divisions were in position, the left wing of the *Eighteenth Army* should not go beyond the line Noyon—Roye, but that the weight of that Army should be transferred to its right wing; so that in co-operation with the Second Army it might gain possession of the (old French) line Caix (6 miles south-east of Villers Bretonneux)—Avre valley. In this idea, Ludendorff concurred. It was, however, settled that when sufficient forces had been assembled on the line Noyon—St. Gobain, they should go forward in a south-westerly direction.

Earlier, during the morning of the 25th, at Avesnes, Ludendorff had verbally given General von Kuhl new instructions for the continuation of the operations of Crown Prince Rupprecht's Group of Armies against the British. "First of all, the British front on both sides of the Scarpe as far as the Lens basin must be shaken and 'smashed by the attacks 'Mars North' and 'Mars South' and 'Valkyrie', in combination.'" The attack would then be carried forward on both sides of Arras with the main pressure on the Lorette ridge towards Houdain. The attack between the La Bassée canal and Armentières should also be prepared, but in a reduced form ("Georgette" instead of "St. George"). The front there also was to be broken. O.H.L. could furnish three or four fresh divisions, to which the Group of Armies should add two or three. If "Mars" and "Valkyrie" were successful, "Georgette" might be dropped. The goal of the *Sixth Army* was fixed by O.H.L. as Boulogne. Doullens—Abbeville remained as the main direction of the *Seventeenth Army*, but a part of that Army would probably have to take the direction of Boulogne, in co-operation with the *Sixth Army*. The *Second Army* would remain directed on Amiens, but a considerable force should be sent north-westwards towards Miramont on account of the difficulties to be surmounted in crossing the valley of the Ancre.

As the "Mars" attacks were tactically difficult and required thorough preparation, the 28th was fixed as zero day. General von Kuhl then pointed out that "Valkyrie"—against the Lorette ridge—seemed even more difficult, and suggested that it should not be simultaneous with "Mars", but a day later; and to this Ludendorff

agreed. The necessary orders were given by the Group of Armies on the 25th.

Thus Ludendorff now adopted—shifting a little south to take advantage of the successes gained in the “Michael” attack—the attack against the British advocated by Kuhl during the winter. Now the *Second*, *Seventeenth* and *Sixth Armies* would deal with the British, whilst the *Eighteenth*, with assistance from the *Seventh*, as originally arranged, held off the French.

As regards the reports of the Armies : “The *Eighteenth Army* “ advanced after very lively fighting, particularly against concealed “ machine-gun nests ”. The *III. Corps* and *XXV. Reserve Corps* did their best to help the *IX. Corps* forward, the latter having great trouble in struggling across the sector south of Nesle ; but, on the whole, the progress was important, and made it necessary, as mentioned above, for the *Seventh Army* to take over part of the ever-increasing flank of the salient which had been won.

The *Second Army*, whose junction with the *Eighteenth* was near Misery (west of St. Christ on the Somme), had hard fighting until evening : “the enemy’s resistance seemed to get stronger. British “ counter-attacks coming from the direction of Albert were directed “ mainly against the *XIII. Corps* and *XXIII. Reserve Corps* [opposite “ the *VII. Corps*], whilst the *XIV. Corps* was much delayed by fire “ from the southern bank of the Somme ”.

The three corps on the right wing of the *Seventeenth Army* remained in their trenches ready to jump off, but the British opposite to them (left of the *VI. Corps* and the *XVII. Corps*) did not withdraw as expected ; their trenches, on the contrary, remained strongly occupied. The left of the Army—its junction with the *Second Army* was near Miraumont on the Ancre—renewed its attacks, but had to defend itself against very strong counter-attacks (north of the *IV. Corps*), supported by numerous tanks. It is admitted that Ervillers remained in British hands, and the rest of the account speaks of “ violent counter-attacks ” on the *VI. Reserve Corps* as it was fighting its way to Bihucourt ; “obstinate resistance”, particularly at Ligny Thilloy and Irles, “desperate resistance and counter-thrust north of “ Bapaume, which threatened to envelop the right of this attack ”.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE (*continued*)

26TH MARCH 1918

(Maps 12, 18 ; Sketches 19, 20)

ON the 26th March, the day marked by the conference of the French and British leaders which gave General Foch, the Chief of the French General Staff, authority to co-ordinate the Allied operations on the Western Front, there took place a further retirement of the French and British troops under General Fayolle south of the Somme. North of the Somme, the Third Army as a whole maintained its position and filled the gaps in its line, although the VII. Corps on the right, by a misunderstanding made an unnecessary wheel back ; on parts of the fronts of the V., IV. and VI. Corps, determined efforts were made by the enemy to close and break through, but without success.

The bad weather of the night of the 25th/26th passed away, but in the early morning there was again a mist which, for a short time, prevented artillery observers from seeing the advance of enemy infantry parties until they were close to the front line. Subsequently, the weather was fine, with a north wind.

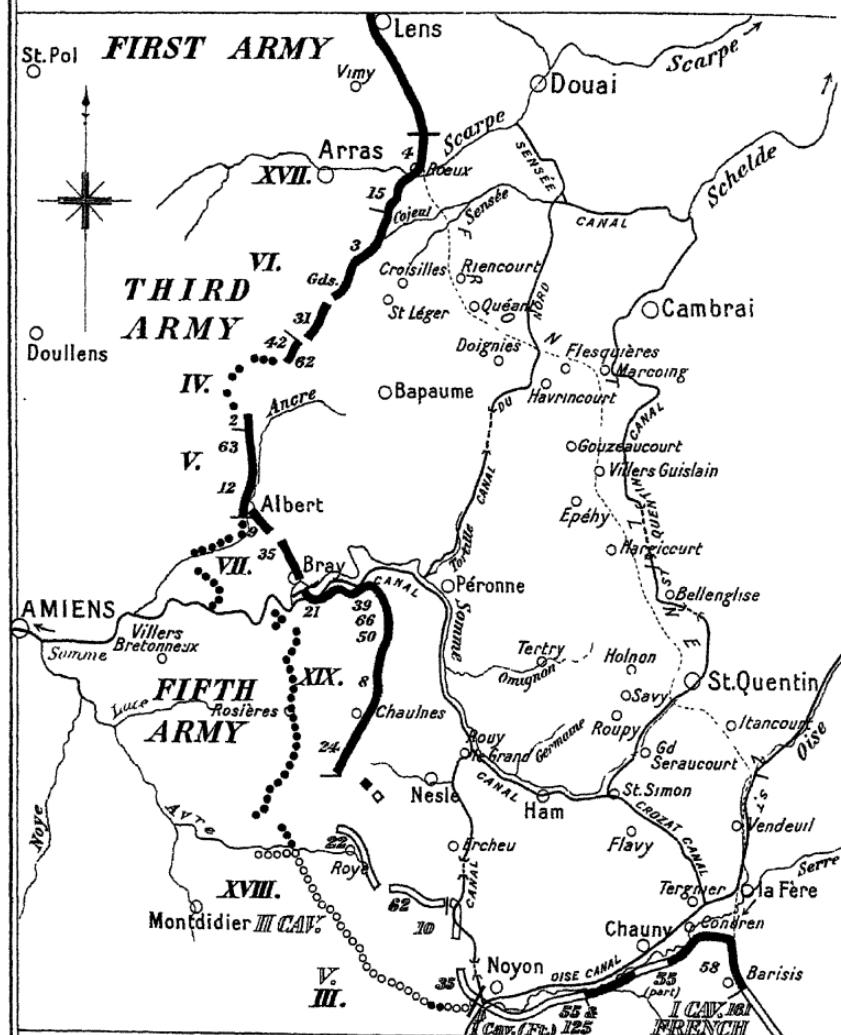
### FIFTH ARMY

**Map 12.** Of the front between the Oise and the Somme, now under the command of General Fayolle, the French held 18 miles and the British 19 miles. It was for the greater part a continuous line ; but there was a three-mile space between the French left at Roye and the right of the XIX. Corps at Fransart, guarded only by the 61st Bde, with 1½ regiments of French cuirassiers (1st Cavalry Division) and a company of the 2/East Lancashire (8th Division) out to the front. To fill the gap there were available the remains of the four



Sketch 19.

## 26<sup>TH</sup> MARCH.



### REFERENCE.

Line 26 <sup>th</sup> March	British, French	27 <sup>th</sup> March a.m.	British, French.
Army boundaries	—	Corps boundaries	—

divisions, the 20th, 36th, 30th and 61st, of the XVIII. Corps. These General Maxse had instructed to assemble at and north-west of Roye, in order to keep connection between Robillot's Corps and the XIX. Corps, and to ensure that if the Allied Armies separated, the XVIII. Corps might still remain with the Fifth Army.<sup>1</sup> The whole of the artillery of this corps, both field and heavy, was, however, retained by the French, and the infantry of the four divisions had no artillery support at all on the 26th.<sup>2</sup>

*Pellé's and Robillot's Corps*

The old III. Corps front and part of the XVIII. Corps front, from behind Noyon to Roye, was held by French troops of Pellé's and Robillot's Corps ; General Gamelin's Group, (9th and 35th Divisions) was opposite Noyon ; then there occurred a 2½-mile gap, beyond which were the 10th, 62nd and 22nd Divisions, the two latter belonging to Robillot's Corps. Parts of three divisions, the 53rd, the 77th and the 56th, with the 1st and 5th Cavalry Divisions, were so near as to become available during the day.

Of the troops of the British III. Corps there remained in the area only the 14th Divn, the 2nd Cavalry Division and Harman's Detachment. The 14th Divn, after being sent to a reserve position, Ribécourt—Thiescourt, some six miles south-west of Noyon, was relieved about 4.30 P.M. by the French 53rd Division, and released ; it then marched to Elincourt, four miles further west, where it spent the night, and was not actually engaged again until the 1st April.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An air report received at 10.30 A.M. by the commander of the Fifth Army stated that large German forces were concentrating at Roye from north-east, east and south-east, and indicated that the general direction of the French retirement was south-west towards Montdidier, whilst that of the British was north-west towards Amiens.

<sup>2</sup> The 36th Divn artillery was with the right of the French 62nd Division, and retired during the day from Candor south-westwards to behind the new French line near Lassigny. The 30th Divn artillery was with the right of the French 22nd Division, and retired from Verpillières to near Beuvraignes. The 20th Divn artillery was four miles behind the left of the French 22nd Division, near Dancourt, and at night was sent back towards Montdidier. The 61st Divn artillery was on the left of that of the 20th, supporting the French 22nd Division, but received orders to cover the morning retirement of the five brigades of the 20th and 61st Divns from Roye. At night the batteries were sent back towards Montdidier, and then six miles north to Hargicourt.

The XVIII. Corps heavy artillery was employed all day behind Roye, and at night received orders to rejoin its corps.

<sup>3</sup> The infantry and pioneers of the 14th Divn, whose strength on the 21st March was 190 officers and 5,727 other ranks (transport details not included), numbered when it was relieved on the 26th, 62 officers and 1,476 other ranks.

On the 25th, the 2nd Cavalry Division (Br.-General T. T. Pitman), about eleven hundred strong, west of the Oise, had been mounted. During this day the mounting of the 3rd Cavalry Division (Br.-General B. P. Portal), with the French east of the Oise, was completed, except for the 6th Cavalry Brigade, which did not rejoin until the 27th. Harman's Detachment, about twelve hundred strong, composed of men of every regiment of the two cavalry divisions, still remained as a separate command, and, with the 2nd Cavalry Division, fought alongside the French.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of General Fayolle's instructions—"on ne "peut pas reculer indéfiniment : il faut se faire tuer sur "place"—the troops of Pellé's and Robillot's Corps, pivoting first on Mont Renaud, south-west of Noyon, fell back four or five miles before the German advance. Upset by German infiltration into gaps, and finding their flanks turned, the French units stood no better than the battalions of the Fifth Army had done against greater odds.

The first German attack at 4 A.M. drove in the left of the 10th Division ; whereupon the whole of its line began to give way, falling back towards the Bois des Essarts—Lagny. At 8 A.M., before General Gamelin's preparations to recover Mont Porquéricourt, situated in the gap between his group and the 10th Division, were completed, the enemy pushed in further through this gap against the left of the 35th Division ; for a time he actually held Mont Renaud. The 2nd Cavalry Division and Harman's Detachment, which were to have been used against Mont Porquéricourt, were then sent to the assistance of the 10th Division. After Br.-General Pitman had outflanked the enemy from the north and brought about a stand, the British and French fought intermixed on a line from Mont Renaud to a point in front of Lagny. Part of the French 58rd Division, lent by the Sixth Army across the Oise, helped to improve matters. General Humbert, however, considered the condition of his troops to be so doubtful that, instead of sending the 77th Division, which had just arrived, to join the battle, he ordered it to take up a rear position behind Lassigny, from Thiescourt to Canny (the night position

The casualties, 128 officers and 4,261 other ranks, had mostly been incurred in the first three days' fighting ; the balance represents men who rejoined during the period.

<sup>1</sup> There was no artillery of the III. Corps in action in this sector on the 26th, except one heavy battery ; and that was withdrawn at 10 A.M.

of the French line) to receive the troops in front when they should retire.

On the front of Robillot's Corps, the first attack about 6 A.M. struck the left of the 62nd Division, and about 8 A.M. the left of the 22nd was engaged. Roye was lost, and the Germans pressed into the gap between Roye and the right of the XIX. Corps. Soon afterwards, the right of the 22nd, exposed by the retirement of the left of the 62nd Division, gave way, and the French infantry drifted slowly rearwards. The French 1st and 5th Cavalry Divisions, about to arrive on the field, were ordered, at 2 and 4 P.M. respectively, to counter-attack on foot ; but it was too late.<sup>1</sup> The line was steadied for a time by the arrival of the 1st Cavalry Division ; but, in face of a further attack at 8 P.M., the 62nd and 22nd Divisions fell back once more and settled down on the line Cannay (in touch with the 10th Division)—Dancourt. From this point the 5th Cavalry Division and the 56th Division, now in the line, carried on the front to the Avre, where it was in touch with the British XVIII. Corps.

The retirement of the 62nd Division had added to the troubles of the 10th Division and of the British cavalry with it by uncovering their left. About 1.30 P.M. attacks on front and on flank drove the division back on to a line running through the Bois des Essarts—Lagny—north of Lagny. Towards 5 P.M. this line was also lost, although the British and Canadian cavalry did their utmost to save the situation.<sup>2</sup> The 10th Division then passed through the 77th. Of the British cavalry, the 3rd and 4th Cavalry Brigades remained in the line near Evricourt south of the Bois des Essarts, until the morning of the 27th ; the 5th Cavalry Brigade and Harman's Detachment were withdrawn behind them to Chiry and Elincourt, respectively.

### XVIII. Corps

The ground over which the XVIII. and XIX. Corps were called upon to operate was the great agricultural plain, called Santerre, which was still covered by the

<sup>1</sup> Shortly after General Robillot's orders were received by the 5th Cavalry Division, Army orders arrived for the transfer of the division, and of the 56th Division, then moving up towards Roye, to the VI. Corps of the First Army, then in course of formation.

<sup>2</sup> They did not charge the German infantry as stated in F.O.A. vi. (i.), p. 317. The actual fighting was done on foot, the horses being used to gallop from position to position where help was required.

French trenches of the 1916 period, when the front line ran west of Noyon, Roye and Chaulnes, to Frise on the Somme. The intention of Lieut.-General Maxse's orders was to establish a front from l'Echelle St. Aurin, on the Avre  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles west of Roye—where he believed the French left would be—strung out along the Avre, to Rovroy, the right of the XIX. Corps' second position.

To reach this line the 36th and 30th Divns had to move forward slightly. The five brigades of the 20th and 61st Divns under Major-General Douglas Smith, then in and near Roye, were to march, under cover of the 61st Bde as flank guard, north-west to Quesnel, and then go into reserve behind the left. Fortunately the five brigades started at 7 A.M.; for hardly had they got clear than a German regiment, pushing by the French flank at Roye, actually passed behind them, making for Andechy and Erches, south of their route. The enemy did not, however, interfere with the column, the head of which reached Quesnel about midday. The flank guard, the 61st Bde, then became rear guard, and followed through Damery and Le Quesnoy. It marched without interruption, only its rear party, as will be seen, coming into contact with the enemy.<sup>1</sup> The 30th Divn, as it moved to take position on receipt of orders at 8.50 A.M., found the enemy nearing Le Quesnoy, which was to have been its right flank, and took up a position with its right at Bouchoir, a mile further back.

The rear party of the 61st Bde remained in Le Quesnoy covering the deployment: it consisted of about a hundred men of the 7/Duke of Cornwall's L.I., under the brigade major, Captain E. P. Combe. At 2 P.M. orders were sent to the detachment to withdraw, but the enemy was now too close for it to get away. Soon after 1 P.M. the Germans, advancing cautiously, had come to within five hundred yards of Le Quesnoy, and by 2 P.M. had captured its eastern edge. Combe's small detachment, assisted by low-flying aeroplanes, which checked the enemy advance, held on to the western edge of the village until 6.30 P.M., when, nearly surrounded, the survivors broke through and made good their retirement through the 30th Divn on Beaufort, where they rejoined the 61st Bde, now reduced to 150 men.

<sup>1</sup> The outlying company of the 2/East Lancashire, with the cuirassiers, was attacked at dawn, and, having orders to move at 8 A.M., retired almost to Roye, where the company got on to the Roye—Amiens road, halting at intervals and manning trenches across the road, until it reached Bouchoir, just before the 30th Divn occupied the village.

The 36th Divn also found that the enemy's advance had been too rapid for it to reach its allotted position, l'Echelle St. Aurin—Andechy—Le Quesnoy : after having entered Andechy the Germans were nearing Le Quesnoy. The 109th Bde occupied a French second line trench of 1916, covered by a certain amount of wire ; the 108th Bde, fired on by machine guns from the woods on the Andechy—Le Quesnoy road, dropped into the same trench, but could not establish touch with the 30th Divn, two miles in rear at Bouchoir. To fill the gap, about 1 P.M. Major-General Nugent ordered his reserve, the 107th Bde,<sup>1</sup> to hold the old French line which followed the Erches—Bouchoir road. The 36th Divn had no artillery support, and could, in fact, form little more than an outpost line. Although it suffered somewhat from German shell fire, which drove the 108th Bde headquarters out of Erches, every attempt of the Germans to advance was frustrated until after dark ; only between 8 and 9 P.M., after a further bombardment of Erches, did a German column<sup>2</sup> push south-westwards into the gap between the two parts of the division. It nearly captured the 108th Bde headquarters with Br.-General C. R. J. Griffiths, who was wounded, while it did take prisoner the G.S.O.I. of the division with two commanding officers, who came up in a motor car. This German inroad also caused some confusion in the administrative arrangements, so that the 108th and 109th Bdes received neither ammunition nor rations or water that night. Nevertheless, although part of an enemy division was behind to back it up, the thrust was stopped, the German column being heavily fired upon from both sides ; but Erches, between the 107th and 108th Bdes, remained in the enemy's hands.

At night, the 36th and 30th Divns were in the front line, in touch on the right with the French and on the left with the XIX. Corps—the 20th Divn was in support, and the 61st in reserve around Quesnel. As a result of the direction given by Lieut.-General Maxse to his divisions, the large gap of the morning had been filled, but a small gap now existed in the 36th Divn front.

<sup>1</sup> Owing to its heavy losses, the 121st Field Company R.E., the pioneer battalion, and the 21st Entrenching Battalion, were attached to the 107th Bde, which, for the purpose of command, was divided, with the personnel of its trench mortar battery, into three groups.

<sup>2</sup> Six battalions, a battery and a machine-gun company of the 28th Division coming from Parvillers as the head of the advanced guard of the division. *Goes*, p. 141.

*XIX. Corps*

With six divisions, the 24th, 8th, 50th, 66th, 39th and 16th, Lieut.-General Watts was holding a front line of thirteen miles extending from Fransart to Frise on the Somme, with a flank along the river. Unless large reinforcements should arrive, it could not be expected that the XIX. Corps would be able to remain in this position ; for there was a three-mile space between its right and the French at Roye, guarded by less than seven hundred infantry and some squadrons of cuirassiers, while on the left the flank of the Third Army was already four miles to the rear, at Bray.

In view of a retirement, Lieut.-General Watts, with the authority of General Gough, had issued orders at 11.30 P.M. on the 25th to the effect that, if seriously pressed on the 26th, the corps would fall back to the line Rouvroy (where the XVIII. Corps was to be)—Froissy (opposite Bray) : the 16th Divn was to come into the line from Proyart to Froissy. The selected line followed a well-marked, low crest which terminated in a long spur at the Somme. The orders did not filter down to brigades until about 9 A.M. on the morning of the 26th, when it was too late to make deliberate arrangements for the moves.

About 6.30 A.M., the right of the 24th Divn had been heavily attacked and the right brigade forced back ; while between 9.15 and 9.30 A.M. reports reached the corps that Herbécourt, in the small 39th Divn sector on the left near the Somme, had been attacked at 7 A.M. and captured ; that the division was retiring ; and that the 66th Divn, with its left thus turned, had also begun to fall back.

At 9.30 A.M., therefore, XIX. Corps headquarters directed that a withdrawal to the Rouvroy—Froissy line should be carried out at once ; but it was to be conducted slowly, so that the new position, some five miles in rear, would not be reached before dark. Owing to constant enemy pressure, however, it was not possible to move thus deliberately, and the troops arrived on the line in the course of the afternoon. The difficulties of retirement in the face of the enemy were much increased by the fact that, in order to find room for the 16th Divn on the left, and as a consequence of the direction of the course of the Somme, the line of retreat of each division could not be

straight to the rear, westwards, but was nearly south-west.

The 24th Divn (Major-General A. C. Daly) retired in echelon, fighting rear-guard actions right back to the Rovroy line ; the 17th Bde, on the left, was the last to leave, holding up enemy attacks against Chaulnes until 11 A.M. The order for retirement sent to the 1/R. Fusiliers miscarried ; so the battalion held on until the afternoon, and then extricated itself with difficulty. The enemy did not follow very far<sup>1</sup> and the other battalions got away without great loss, except the 9/East Surrey (72nd Bde), near the exposed right flank. Caught in rear, it fought on until its ammunition was expended, when the enemy charged and captured the two officers and 55 other ranks, who out of three hundred men alone remained unwounded.

On reaching the Rovroy line, some reinforcements, consisting of the 5th Field Squadron R.E., the 173rd Tunnelling Company R.E., the 15th Entrenching Battalion, the XVIII. Corps School, and details of the XIX. Corps, which had been digging the new line, enabled the battalions to snatch a short rest : the enemy did not attack, and the ensuing night passed quietly.

Orders for retirement reached the 8th Division at 10 A.M., and it accomplished the movement in good order without serious difficulty : the 23rd and 24th Brigades were both attacked at the moment of withdrawal, but repulsed the enemy with heavy loss. Covered during the final stages by the 25th Bde, which had been in support, the two former brigades had passed through Lihons by 2 P.M. Then the division, still retaining the 150th Bde and two battalions of the 151st Bde of the 50th Divn, was able to settle down on the new line, reinforced by the 20th Entrenching Battalion which had been digging it.

By the capture of Herbécourt in the 39th Divn sector, about 8 A.M., the enemy had gained possession of a footing on what had been known during the battle of the Somme

<sup>1</sup> The 28th, 1st Guard (from third line), 5th and 6th Divisions (both from second line), 113th, 243rd, 19th and 208th, with the 88th and 23rd Divisions in support, attacked the XIX. Corps.

According to "Regt. No. 12" (5th Division) the limit of the objective of the III. Corps (5th, 6th, 23rd and 113th Divisions) was the Fransart-Chilly road ; consequently the 5th Division halted there until late in the evening, and then advanced and stumbled suddenly in the dark on British troops in Rovroy.

Goes, p. 140, states that after reaching Chaulnes, the divisions, specially mentioning the 5th and 6th, "wheeled from a westerly to a more south-westerly direction of attack".

1916 as the Flaucourt plateau, which had been captured by the French on the 1st-2nd July 1916. It was high ground, which commanded and made it possible to enfilade the British line both to the north and to the south. Consequently, about 9 A.M., the whole of the 39th Divn, as well as the 66th, on its right, fell back westwards a couple of miles to a position east of Dompierre, extending northwards towards Eclusier. This exposed the left of the 50th Divn, and by 10 A.M. this formation also was falling back south-westwards past Foucaucourt, as had been ordered. The gap thus formed by divergent retreat, enabled the enemy to threaten the right flank of the 66th Divn at Dompierre, so that about noon both the 66th and 39th Divns made a retirement right back to the Rovroy—Froissy line. In order to cover a possible retirement of the 66th Divn the composite battalion made up from the 198th Bde, which was in reserve, had been sent to Foucaucourt, where it managed to hold on until nearly 1 P.M. and so fulfil its mission. The 39th Divn similarly brought up its reserve brigade, the 116th to south-east of Chuignes, some three miles west of Dompierre, to cover the withdrawal of the other two brigades. In conjunction with the 13/Gloucestershire (Pioneers), the brigade fought a rear-guard action back to the new line, during which, according to their own accounts, the Germans suffered severely from machine-gun fire.

The gap of some three thousand yards, which had opened owing to the retirement of the 39th Divn westwards while the 66th withdrew south-westwards, was filled by the 198th Composite Battalion, which was sent to Rainecourt. Rainecourt, with the adjacent village of Framerville, lies on a broad spur running towards the Somme; unluckily about 3.30 P.M., British heavy artillery bombarded the place, which was then evacuated and occupied by the enemy, who then proceeded to attack Framerville and soon secured it also. Several counter-attacks were then made by troops both of the 39th and of the 50th Divns; but, as they never succeeded in ejecting the enemy from Framerville, it was decided to abandon further attempts to do so and to hold a line just behind the village.

At night, the 198th Composite Battalion was relieved by a battalion made up of reinforcements, under Lieut.-Colonel W. B. Little, and shortly afterwards another battalion of reinforcements, under Major R. H. Kinghan, came up in reserve. The 50th Divn was also strengthened

by the 22nd Entrenching Battalion, which was working on the new line.

The 16th Divn, facing north, was stretched out along the southern bank of the Somme. It had sent back its engineers, pioneers and a working party of 800 infantry soon after 8 A.M. to prepare its portion of the new line, from Proyart to Froissy. Soon after 1 P.M. the 47th Bde, which lay furthest to the west, was moved up to hold Proyart, the right of the new line, and the Somme bridges were prepared for demolition. On receipt of the corps order, at 10 A.M., the other two brigades had begun to retire according to plan, and by 2.30 P.M. the whole division was on the new position. During the afternoon the German infantry advanced to the attack against the centre, covered by artillery and machine-gun fire, but the fire of the divisional artillery caused the enemy to hesitate somewhat, and the 48th Bde was able to hold its ground. Later, at 6.15 P.M., the Germans, assisted by artillery fire from the northern bank of the Somme, now lying open to them by reason of the withdrawal of the right of the Third Army, as will presently be described, attacked the left; whereupon the 49th Bde swung back so as to face this fire, and the 48th, to some extent, conformed to the movement. The line, however, remained unbroken, the 11/Hampshire (Pioneers) being used to fill gaps. Meanwhile the engineers had been sent back to Méricourt to hold the passages of the Somme. This measure had become imperative owing to the retirement of the Third Army and of the 1st Cavalry Division (less Legard's Dismounted Brigade at Buire), which had been guarding the river crossings against an attack from the south. The cavalry having gone back to Bussy les Daours (6 miles east of Amiens), by order of the Cavalry Corps, the left of the Fifth Army was thus entirely in the air; whilst to enhance the danger to the flank, behind it there stretched a reach of the Somme over five miles in length, where the enemy might cross if not opposed and descend on the rear of the XIX. Corps.

It was not until 9 P.M. that the extent of the retirement of the VII. Corps became known to Lieut.-General Watts. He at once ordered the demolition of all the remaining Somme bridges as far west as Cérisy ( $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles west of Froissy),<sup>1</sup> and called on General Gough for help to protect

<sup>1</sup> The demolitions were carried out by the corps Army Troops Companies R.E. and the 16th Divn Engineers.

his left flank. In response, there were sent to him a Canadian machine-gun battery and a composite battalion of 350 men, with six Lewis guns, under Lieut.-Colonel R. Horn. These reinforcements held Cérisy and the crossings existing at the two Saillys below that place, whilst the engineers of the 16th and 39th Divns and small parties of infantry guarded the crossings at Morcourt, Méricourt and Etinehem.

At night, then, the French were holding a continuous line from the Oise in rear of Noyon to l'Echelle St. Aurin on the Avre, whence the Fifth Army (XVIII. and XIX. Corps)—with a break owing to the small enemy lodgment at Erches—carried the front on to the Somme. On the left, there was no connection with the Third Army, the right of whose main line was more than five miles behind the left of the Fifth Army, but the passages of the Somme in this gap of five miles were held by small garrisons, some of them hastily organized.

A few field artillery reinforcements had been received by the XIX. Corps during the day, amounting to thirty guns, so that it had 371 field guns to cover its 13-mile front, a quite inadequate number for the task,<sup>1</sup> and even with the return of four 9·2-inch howitzers to the line, there were available only 74 heavy guns, which remained behind the Rouvroy—Proyart line all day. The artillery made good practice against enemy infantry after the mist cleared; but except for enfilade fire from the northern bank of the Somme, the enemy artillery gave little trouble. It ceased fire when shot at, not because guns were knocked out, but because the Germans wished to be careful of the few pieces they had been able to push forward. In fact, at this stage of the battle they had to fight largely without artillery support. The British artillery retirement, therefore, was carried out deliberately, and generally by batteries. Meanwhile measures were being taken to ensure the return of the XVIII. Corps artillery from the French.

There was little else that General Gough could do except organize another rear line. On the night of the 25th/26th he had decided that to secure the safety of Amiens and its important railway junction, the "Amiens 'Defence Line'" should be put in order and occupied by any officers and men on whom he could lay hands. This

<sup>1</sup> On the 24th Divn front, 86; on the 8th Division, 79; on the 50th Divn, 48; on the 66th Divn, 45; on the 39th Divn, 53; on the 18th Divn, 60.

line, eight miles long and fifteen miles in front of Amiens, had been constructed by the French in 1915, and ran in a slight curve from Demuin on the Luce, 4 miles in front of Villers Bretonneux to Sailly le Sec, on the north bank of the Somme. The line had been carefully sited and well wired, but during 1917 some of the trenches had been filled in, and the wire removed, in order to allow of the cultivation of the ground by the proprietors.

The organization of the force to man this line was entrusted to Major-General P. G. Grant, the Chief Engineer of the Fifth Army. It was found that some 2,900 men, mostly engineers, could be collected, and during the 26th, they were set to work on the position.<sup>1</sup>

General Gough, however, found that he could not spare the services of his Chief Engineer indefinitely, and Br.-General H. C. Rees, of the 150th Bde (50th Divn), whose troops had been attached to the 8th Division since the evening of the 24th, was sent during the day to take over from Major-General Grant. Later in the evening, Major-General G. G. S. Carey, who had been designated to command a division arrived, and he was directed to take over from Br.-General Rees, who then became commander of the Centre Sector. Henceforward the troops were known as "Carey's Force".

#### <sup>1</sup> Right Sector :

Under Lieut.-Colonel N. M. S. Irwin : 216th Army Troops Company R.E., III. Corps School, 2 companies 6th United States (Railway) Engineers (500), 353rd Electrical & Mechanical Company R.E. and detachment Fifth Army Field Survey Company R.E. Total, 1,500 men.

#### Centre Sector :

Under Lieut.-Colonel O. B. Graham : No. 4 Workshop Company R.E., Fifth Army Infantry School, Fifth Army Sniping School, 253rd Tunnelling Company R.E., 217th Army Troops Company R.E. Total, 880 men.

#### Left Sector :

Under Lieut.-Colonel R. Horn : 144th and 213th Army Troops Companies R.E., Fifth Army Musketry School, XIX. Corps School, detachment of Fifth Army Signal Company R.E. Total, 520 men.

Three staff officers were lent to Major-General Grant.

During the day, 76 Lewis guns from the Army Gun Park and 16 Vickers guns from a Canadian machine gun company were put into the line. The Fifth Army Signal detachment took over the signal duties, assisted by nine grooms as mounted orderlies, and 20 G.S. wagons were allotted as transport ; but the supply of the force was unsatisfactory until the staff of the 1st Cavalry Division arrived to assist.

Early in the morning of the 27th, Lieut.-Colonel Horn was directed to guard the crossings of the Somme, and the U.S. Engineers were then shifted over to the Left Sector.

On the 28th, a reinforcement of 400 men of the 2nd Battalion Canadian Railway Troops arrived. Stragglers, too, were systematically collected to add to the force.

## THIRD ARMY

**Map 13.** In the Third Army the operations of the 26th were marked by an unnecessary wheel back of the bulk of the VII. Corps, pivoting on Albert, from the line Bray—Albert to behind the Ancre; also by the alarm caused by the unfounded rumours of the penetration of the Germans into Hébuterne in the gap on the IV. Corps front. Actually this gap was filled, and the line of the IV., VI. and XVII. Corps remained unchanged during the day except for a small loss of ground near Moyenneville. But serious trouble was caused by the congestion of the roads, brought about by the retiring transport, which made the movement of reinforcements slow, vexatious and difficult. Fortunately the enemy's aircraft never appeared to turn confusion into rout, so that by diverting the lightest and best horsed vehicles, such as field batteries and empty ammunition columns, off the roads and across country the greater part of the heavy traffic was got clear.

The immense pressure which the Germans had brought against the southern flank of his Army caused General Byng to send out a warning order for a further retirement after the issue of the final amendment at 10.5 P.M. on the 25th to his 7.40 P.M. orders. This new warning was timed 2.20 A.M. on the 26th and was received by corps at various times after 3 A.M., though a preliminary version had already been telephoned to corps commanders.<sup>1</sup> It began :—

“ Every effort must be made to check the enemy's advance by disputing ground. It is to be distinctly understood that no retirement is to take place unless the tactical situation imperatively demands it. In case of our line being forced further back, the line will pivot on XVII. Corps, and fall back fighting in a north-westerly direction to the line<sup>2</sup> Beaurains [3 miles behind the then right of the XVII. Corps]—Blaireville—Adinfer—Gommecourt—Colincamps—Hedauville—Warloy [9 miles N.W. of Bray, the then right of the VII. Corps, and well behind the Ancre]. Cavalry Corps will protect the right flank falling back towards the general line Amiens—Doullens.” The rest of the order was concerned with boundaries.

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 31.

<sup>2</sup> Marked on Map 13 by the castellated line, which near Hébuterne has the words “Purple Line” against it.

*VII. Corps*

No corps commander issued any instructions or orders on receipt of this warning except Lieut.-General Congreve (VII. Corps). His orders, timed 2.15 A.M.,<sup>1</sup> were based on the telephonic version of the Third Army orders, and were likewise telephoned to divisions. They began as follows: "The VII. Corps will fight to-day on the line Bray— "Albert in order to delay the enemy as long as possible "without being so involved as to make retirement im- "possible. Retirement when made will be to the north "[? west] of the Ancre [pivoting on Albert] which is to "be held again [*sic*] as a rear-guard position, all bridges "being destroyed after crossing. They will be prepared "for demolition under orders of C.E. VII. Corps. The "retirement will be from the right".

The new position, Ribemont (on the Ancre, 6 miles S.W. of Albert)—Albert, was divided between the divisions; roads thereto were allotted; the transport was instructed "to move as early as possible", and a special detachment of two thousand details, under Lieut.-Colonel R. W. Hadow (Black Watch), was detailed to cover the right flank. Finally, places were named to which the divisional headquarters should fall back: 21st and 35th, to Bresle, and the 9th, to Millencourt, both west of the Ancre and close together. Corps headquarters were moved back at 10 A.M. from Corbie to Montigny, six miles behind these divisional headquarters.

Whilst his written orders were in preparation, Lieut.-General Congreve spoke personally by telephone, at length, to Major-General Franks (35th Division), who was at Sailly Lorette, and gave him to understand that the retirement to the west bank of the Ancre would definitely take place during the afternoon of the 26th, and that, in addition to his own division, the various detachments of the 9th and 21st Divns in the front line<sup>2</sup> would continue

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 32.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of the retirement, a force, known as "McCulloch's Force", was formed from the remaining pioneers and infantry of the 21st Divn; it contained about twelve hundred men with two machine guns, under Lieut.-Colonel A. J. McCulloch (7th Dragoon Guards, but commanding the 9/K.O.Y.L.I.), and by 8 A.M. on 26th it was assembled on the line Chipilly—Morlancourt, in rear of the right flank of the VII. Corps line. The portions of the 21st Divn not with this force or in Headlam's Detachment, were moved back to Bresle (3½ miles W.S.W. of Albert) during the 26th.

under his orders. In view of Sir Douglas Haig's plan, as implied in General Byng's 2.20 A.M. orders, for the Third Army to fall back north-westwards until sufficient forces could be collected from the First Army to counter-attack the Germans who had penetrated towards Amiens, the VII. Corps commander seems to have assumed that all that was expected of the VII. Corps was a series of rear-guard actions to cover the retirement of the Third Army : that is, the enemy was to be delayed by a show of force on a series of positions, but the retiring troops should never stay sufficiently long on any of them to allow the enemy to close. Major-General Franks then asked the specific question : how long would he be expected to remain on the Bray—Albert position ; to which Lieut.-General Congreve replied, "10 A.M.". General Franks assured him that he could hold it longer than that, and in reply was told that if he held it until dark, he would have done very well, but he was on no account to risk infantry or guns, even if he lost some of his baggage.

The VII. Corps written orders, when they arrived, seemed to make the retirement contingent on the enemy's action, and to be less definite than the telephone conversation. But, as the latter had been so long and so explicit, and as it is unusual to say more about a retirement in written orders than is absolutely necessary, there seemed to be no possible doubt as to what was required of the 35th Division and its attached troops ; the places selected by the VII. Corps for headquarters were, significantly, beyond the Ancre, and no arrangements were made for refilling supplies or ammunition on the Bray—Albert line.

Between 3 and 4.30 A.M., therefore, Major-General Franks issued orders ; he notified that he was in command of all troops of the VII. Corps on the Bray—Albert position and nominated Br.-General J. H. W. Pollard (106th Bde) to the temporary command of the infantry of the 35th Division. He gave detailed instructions for the withdrawal in echelon from the right across the Ancre, allotted crossings and gave the dispositions to be taken up on the further bank.

Shortly before 9 A.M. the VI. Corps, and possibly others, were informed by telephone by the General Staff Third Army that, in view of the north-westerly withdrawal, the corps headquarters were to move back at once.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The VII. Corps headquarters moved back from Corbie to Montigny at 10 A.M. ; the V. Corps from Toutsencourt to Talmas at 6.30 A.M. ; the VI.

During the morning, Lieut.-General Congreve, who had already notified the removal of his headquarters, motored to Hénencourt Chateau, near Bresle, the new headquarters assigned by him to the 35th Division; but Major-General Franks was out at the front. So, taking Br.-General Pollard with him in his car, he visited Br.-General Headlam (Composite Force, 21st Divn); Lieut.-Colonel L. M. Stevens (104th Brigade); Br.-General H. W. Newcome, C.R.A. 21st Divn, commanding the field artillery of the 21st Divn and 35th Division which covered the front; Br.-General A. H. Marindin (105th Brigade), and Major-General C. A. Blacklock, 9th Divn.<sup>1</sup> All these officers had received Major-General Franks's instructions for the retirement across the Ancre, and Lieut.-General Congreve impressed on them and on other officers with whom he spoke that it was important to gain time for the removal of valuable stores and guns, but that the importance of this task was not to be held so great as that of preserving the troops from heavy losses.<sup>2</sup> He further mentioned that if the troops on the right, which were to move first, found that their retreat to the Ancre, as ordered, was cut off, they could fall back over the Somme and join the Fifth Army, and he gave to Br.-General Pollard a list of the Somme bridges which had been destroyed. All commanders in the front line, therefore, were fully prepared for a retirement.

As the mist cleared off, towards 9.30 A.M.—the hour at which Lieut.-General Watts ordered the XIX. Corps to fall back so that its left on the Somme would be level with the right of the VII. Corps at Bray—the Germans began distant shelling of the right of the line, after which one of their aeroplanes flew over it. Otherwise, except for some firing on the officer commanding the 12/Royal Scots and his groom, who rode along the front in order to fix the outpost line and were mistaken for, and reported as, German mounted scouts, the front was quiet.

A little after 11 A.M. enemy troops appeared over the

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Corps from Pas to Tinques (hour not stated). The IV. Corps remained at Marieux (8 miles west of Hébuterne), where they had gone the previous evening.

<sup>1</sup> Major-General Blacklock subsequently received corps orders, and instructed the 27th Bde, the only troops of his division in the line, to fight as long as possible without becoming so involved as to make retirement impossible.

<sup>2</sup> To Br.-General Headlam, he used much the same words as he had on the telephone to Major-General Franks: "Stay on as long as you can; "you should be able to hold on until 10 A.M.".

ridge between Suzanne and Fricourt, and they were observed working down the valley from Fricourt ; but the attempts of enemy patrols to close were easily checked by the outposts until 1 P.M., and by that hour the situation had been improved by the arrival, soon after midday, of Br.-General D. J. E. Beale-Browne's mounted column from the 1st Cavalry Division.<sup>1</sup> This force, after it had been disposed between Sailly Lorette and Bray facing south to cover the right of the corps, sent out patrols to establish touch with the left of the Fifth Army. Br.-General Beale-Browne's orders were to cover the right of the VII. Corps at Bray and, in case of retirement, to fall back with it and occupy the gap between Corbie on the Somme and Ribemont on the Ancre. At 12.30 P.M. he received additional instructions to reconnoitre a line of trenches said to run—as it did—from Sailly le Sec on the Somme to Ribemont on the Ancre, with a view to occupying it if forced back. He was also informed that Ribemont would be the right of the Third Army.

At 12.30 P.M. Major-General Franks issued an order that, as soon as the 106th Brigade, the reserve of the 35th Division—which, with two brigades of field artillery, had been withdrawn for the purpose—was in position about Morlancourt (about half-way between the front line and the Ancre) the retirement of the other brigades holding the corps front and of Br.-General Headlam's Force was to begin.

At 1 P.M. the VII. Corps was still on the line Bray—Albert, and had not been seriously troubled ; but from that hour the pressure of German patrols along the whole front grew obviously stronger, and soon a fierce attack fell on the 27th Bde. But the liaison between the infantry and the artillery was excellent, and their combined fire brought the enemy advance to a standstill.

At 1.20 P.M. Major-General Franks issued another order :<sup>2</sup> if no new attack developed by 3 P.M. the retirement was to begin, from the right, at that hour : the reserve brigade was to maintain its position at Morlancourt until dark. The arrival of a copy of this order at 9th Divn headquarters caused Major-General Blacklock to refer the matter

<sup>1</sup> This consisted of 150 men from each brigade of the division ; it left Bussy les Daours at 10.35 A.M.

<sup>2</sup> Addressed to Br.-General Pollard, 35th Division, Br.-General Headlam, 105th Brigade, C.R.A. of the 35th Division, and the 9th Divn. It did not reach Br.-General Headlam or the C.R.A.

to VII. Corps headquarters, and he was then informed that the troops were only to be withdrawn in order to save them from being cut off. No further action was taken.

Towards 2 P.M. enemy detachments renewed their attempts to close, this time against the left of the 105th Brigade, next to the 27th. The situation there grew so serious that nine tanks (of the 1st Battalion) were hurried up as reinforcement, and they brought a temporary respite. Later these tanks covered the retreat with success, the enemy's infantry not venturing to come near them.

The retirement was begun about 2.30 P.M., that is, before the time fixed by Major-General Franks, and it is difficult to determine for certain how it started. Shortly before that hour, the corps heavy artillery had shelled Bray, and the line of Headlam's Force east of that place came back. This may have led the troops of the 104th Brigade to believe that the retirement from the right had begun : for soon after they were seen to be falling back. Br.-General Headlam at once sent a message to the 104th Brigade to say that he did not intend to withdraw until after dark. This message was not received by Colonel Stevens, and the retirement of the 104th Brigade was continued, the 18/Lancashire Fusiliers being nearly cut off in the Bois des Tailles by Germans who followed up. The battalion was rescued by the fire of the 17/Lancashire Fusiliers and some of Hunt's Force and of machine guns, which effectively stopped the pursuers. Half an hour after the 104th, the 105th Brigade, next on the left, also retired. It passed through Morlancourt at 4 P.M. The left of Headlam's Force also began to slip off, but was stopped, and this detachment, though now enfiladed from the north, held its ground until ordered to begin its withdrawal at 4 P.M.

Just before 3 P.M. news reached the VII. Corps headquarters at Montigny that the retirement had been begun ; almost simultaneously, a message, despatched at 2.35 P.M. from Third Army headquarters, was received, which was one of the first consequences of the Allied Conference that had taken place at Doullens :—

“ Reference No. G.B. 40 of last night,<sup>1</sup> it must be distinctly understood that no voluntary retirement<sup>2</sup> from

<sup>1</sup> Appendix 31.

<sup>2</sup> The use of this expression would seem to indicate that Lieut.-General Congreve had reported by telephone his arrangements for retirement to the Third Army ; there is no trace of any message to this effect.

"our present line is intended. Every effort is to be made  
"to maintain our present line."

Lieut.-General Congreve thereupon called up Major-General Franks on the telephone; read to him the opening sentences of the Third Army message; and instructed him to take all possible steps to stop the withdrawal, and to restore the line. Leaving written orders to this effect to be sent out by his staff, Major-General Franks at once motored forward through the congested traffic to Morlancourt, where Br.-General Pollard was with the 106th Brigade. Br.-General Marindin (105th Brigade) happened at the time to be passing through with his troops, and, after consulting the two brigadiers, Major-General Franks, about 4 P.M., decided that it was too late to stop the withdrawal.

A quarter of an hour earlier, the 27th Bde (9th Divn) had begun to fall back. The retirement of the brigades southward of it had enabled the Germans to advance to the Bray—Albert road and thus enflade its right flank; so after forming a defensive flank, Br.-General W. D. Croft, at 4 P.M., ordered the withdrawal, already arranged, to begin.

Beale-Browne's column maintained itself on the Sailly Lorette—Bray line until nearly the same hour, by which time Bray was in the enemy's hands. From Chipilly, about the centre of that line, northward to the Corbie—Bray road, 1½ miles short of Morlancourt, McCulloch's Force was still holding on. To the north of the road, Br.-General Beale-Browne had seen for an hour or more British troops retiring and Germans advancing on Morlancourt. About 4.30 P.M., therefore, he moved his column back and formed it up just in rear of McCulloch's left flank.

In the midst of the general retirement, acting under telephone instructions from General Byng at Doullens, the General Staff of the Third Army, at 3.40 P.M., issued a formal written order—previously telephoned to corps—that "there must be no withdrawal. . . . Any local withdrawals . . . will be in the general direction east to west and not north-west. . . . The VII. Corps must ensure that its right is firmly maintained on the Somme. "The position at Bray is to be maintained with the utmost determination".

This order, repeated by telephone, reached 35th Division headquarters soon after four o'clock, while the VII. Corps' written orders, issued at 5.40 P.M., did not arrive there

until 6.18 P.M. Major-General Franks was motoring to the Morlancourt front, but at 4.25 P.M. his staff informed his subordinates by written messages that all orders for withdrawal had been cancelled, and that the Bray—Albert road was to be held : if the line were driven back the flanks were to rest on the Somme and Ancre, and the retirement was not to be carried beyond the latter river.

It was two or three hours before the messages reached their destinations,<sup>1</sup> and, in the meantime, the retreat had continued. By 6.30 P.M. most of the infantry of the VII. Corps was behind the Ancre. The only troops which could be stopped consisted of the rear guard, the 106th Brigade, which, having fulfilled its task at Morlancourt, was on the point of falling back. Throughout the day McCulloch's Force had not been threatened, but at 5.30 P.M., seeing the troops on his left front retiring through Morlancourt, its commander judged it time to carry out his morning orders and conform to the retirement. Fifteen minutes later, when his twelve hundred men had started to fall back, the brigade major of the 106th Brigade brought him a written message from Br.-General Pollard informing him that it was most urgent that he should remain in position until nightfall. With the aid of his staff, Colonel McCulloch was able to stop the last five hundred men from joining, in their turn, in the retirement, and they were placed south of Morlancourt, so as to prolong the right of the 106th Brigade. Br.-General Beale-Browne, who was about to move back to the Sailly le Sec—Ribemont trenches, as previously ordered, came up to their assistance.

Bodies of German troops could now be seen across the valley north of the Bois des Tailles, offering magnificent targets ; but, as the entire artillery with the exception of two batteries had gone back, it was impossible to take full advantage of such opportunities. As 6.30 P.M. approached, the enemy made a determined attack on the battalions of the 106th Brigade around Morlancourt, and, "having "achieved their object", these withdrew, under cover of a rear guard, at 7 P.M. westwards and across the Ancre. Beale-Browne's Force went back to the Sailly le Sec—Ribemont line about the same time, but McCulloch's Force held on a little longer until 7.45 P.M. Its communications then being threatened, it got away in the dark with con-

<sup>1</sup> This message was not received at all by the 104th Brigade, and Br.-Generals Marindin and Headlam did not get theirs until 7.5 P.M. when they were in Buire.

siderable difficulty, reaching the Ancre at Ribemont about 9.30 P.M.

Marindin's 105th Brigade and Headlam's Force were resting at Buire, on the far side of the Ancre, when at 7.5 P.M. the 4.25 P.M. message to cancel the retreat and hold the morning line Bray—Albert reached the two brigadiers. It was plainly impossible to return to that position, but Br.-General Marindin, to comply with the spirit of the message, gave orders for his brigade to recross the Ancre and re-occupy Morlancourt, and Br.-General Headlam agreed to advance on his right. Br.-General Marindin informed the 35th Division of his intentions, at the same time making it plain that he considered the undertaking hopeless owing to the small numbers at his disposal, the exhaustion of the men, and the shortage of ammunition. Shortly afterwards, a staff officer from the VII. Corps brought him a verbal message that the orders to re-occupy the Bray line were cancelled. One battalion which was crossing the river was easily intercepted and brought back, but the other, which had got further, did not rejoin the brigade until 1.30 A.M. The order sent to the 104th and 106th Brigades to remain east of the Ancre, was likewise cancelled; they in fact had not recrossed from the western bank. McCulloch's Force was, however, left east of the Ancre, holding a front of a mile facing east, immediately south of Méricourt, under the orders of Br.-General H. R. Cumming (110th Bde of the 21st Divn) whose force (formerly Hadow's Force) of two thousand details carried on the line to the Somme at Sailly le Sec, covered by patrols of Beale-Browne's detachment.

At 5.15 P.M. the Third Army had made the Cavalry Corps (from which the 2nd and 3rd Cavalry Divisions were still absent) responsible for holding the passages of the Somme from Bray, where it was supposed the right of the VII. Corps still lay, to Corbie, against any enemy advancing from the east or south-east. At 7.20 P.M. Lieut.-General Kavanagh informed the 1st Cavalry Division (Major-General R. L. Mullens) of its task. Soon after, the Third Army, having heard of the withdrawal of the VII. Corps, cancelled its 5.15 P.M. orders by telephone, and directed the Cavalry Corps to co-operate with the VII. Corps in holding the line between the Somme and the Ancre. At 8.25 P.M. therefore, Lieut.-General Kavanagh ordered the 1st Cavalry Division to hold the triangle between the Somme and the Ancre about Morlancourt. Ten minutes

earlier, however, the 1st Cavalry Division had learnt that the VII. Corps had fallen back to the Ancre, and that Cumming's Force had been sent to the Sailly le Sec—Méricourt line, where two Australian battalions would join it. Br.-General Beale-Browne therefore was instructed to move to the same line, which he had in fact reached shortly after 7 P.M. He was either to help the infantry, or to hold the line if the infantry was not there ; but in any case to push patrols eastward. The remainder of his own brigade (2nd Cavalry Brigade) was moved forward across the Ancre to support him. Subsequently, about 11 P.M., after Br.-General Beale-Browne had reported the situation, the Third Army—considering the retention of the ground between the Somme and the Ancre to be vital—put the 1st Cavalry Brigade at his disposal ; and finally the 9th Cavalry Brigade was moved forward in support from Bussy les Daours to west of Bonnay (on the Ancre, just north of Corbie).

By the early morning of the 27th, the line Sailly le Sec—Méricourt, between the Somme and the Ancre was held by Beale-Browne's and Cumming's composite forces, with the mounted outposts of the 2nd Cavalry Brigade in front ; the right of these forces was five miles behind the left of the XIX. Corps (Fifth Army), which was nearly abreast of Bray. The Germans had occupied Morlancourt,<sup>1</sup> but south of this point they had not come on beyond Bois des Tailles, and were out of touch. The VII. Corps held the line from the Ancre at Ribemont to just short of Albert (abandoned, as we shall see, by the V. Corps), with two brigades of the 35th Division and two of the 9th Divn, with which latter the enemy was in touch. The other units of the divisions and the 21st Divn (less its detachment with Br.-General Cumming) were in reserve. The 11th Australian Brigade (less a battalion) had arrived at Heilly (just west of Ribemont).

### V. Corps

After their retirement by night the troops of the V. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir E. A. Fanshawe) had reached,

<sup>1</sup> The left flank of the 13th Division which came up from second line, reached Morlancourt. Goes, p. 136.

The divisions to the south were delayed by the difficulties of the ground and enfilade fire from the XIX. Corps south of the river. Goes, p. 140, speaks of " alternate fight and march ", but only one battalion of the other nine divisions following the VII. Corps got abreast of Morlancourt.

more or less unmolested, the position which had been ordered on the west bank of the Ancre. Of the five divisions, of which the 12th alone was fresh, the 17th and the 47th were now in reserve; but it had not been possible to relieve the greater part of the infantry of the 63rd before daylight, and the front line, from Albert to Hamel (where the turn in the course of the Ancre takes place) was held by the 35th and 36th Brigades of the 12th Division (Major-General A. B. Scott), and the 188th and 189th Bdes of the 63rd Divn (Major-General C. E. Lawrie), with their relief, the battalions of the 37th Brigade, interspersed amongst their units.

With the choice of holding the old position on the heights east of Albert, on the left bank of the Ancre, or the high ground west of the devastated town, it had been decided to adopt the latter course. The ruins of Albert were therefore abandoned to the enemy, the right of the 35th Brigade behind the town being in touch with the troops on the left of the VII. Corps, whose movements could clearly be seen. On the left of the V. Corps, actually beyond its assigned boundary, the 2nd Divn (Major-General C. E. Pereira) was used to form a defensive flank in the old British position facing Beaumont Hamel; for there was a huge gap of  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles between the corps boundary and the actual right of the IV. Corps near Bucquoy. A mounted reconnaissance by a staff officer carried out about 9 a.m. showed that for at least two miles from the flank of the 2nd Divn, as far as the southern edge of Hébuterne, which was occupied, there was not a single British soldier; and that the Germans were rapidly approaching Serre, which lay in the gap and was less than two miles from Hébuterne. Towards the gap, however, the New Zealand Division (Major-General Sir A. H. Russell) was marching from the south-west, its headquarters being at Hedauville ( $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles north-west of Albert), and its leading battalion near the left of the 2nd Divn. The subsequent fighting in the gap, into which the enemy pressed, will be dealt with as a whole in the narrative of the IV. Corps.

In the 12th Division and 63rd Divn areas the morning passed uneventfully, as the seven enemy divisions opposite the V. Corps front were still some distance away. It was not until after midday that the Germans were observed to be massing on Tara and Usna hills, opposite the 35th Brigade north of Albert, and also near Authuille Wood, opposite the 36th, where a battalion forming up in a railway

siding north-west of Albert was completely dispersed by two Lewis guns of the 9/Essex. During the afternoon many more battalions were seen to the south in extended order advancing into the Ancre valley and following up the VII. Corps towards Dernancourt and Méaulte, whilst mounted men were also observed on the high ground in rear of them. Behind them again much movement of artillery and wheeled transport could be noticed, proceeding in a southerly direction along the ridge between Fricourt and Bray ; it seemed, therefore, although about 4 P.M. touch was obtained with the left of the VII. Corps south-west of Albert, as if the enemy might soon be round the right flank of the V. Corps.

About 4.30 P.M. the Germans began pouring troops into Albert.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after, they began to emerge, deploying fanwise south-west along the Amiens road and north-west towards Bouzincourt. They suffered heavily from British fire, and soon returned to the western edge of the railway embankment in the town ; so the position of the 85th Brigade remained unchanged, except that one post, within grenade-range of some houses, was drawn in.<sup>2</sup>

Opposite the 36th Brigade, the enemy made two determined attempts to cross the Ancre at Aveluy, both of which were repulsed ; north-west of Authuille the 188th Bde drove back a small attack launched as darkness was coming on.

Lieut.-General Fanshawe had felt most concern for his left flank, directing some of his reserves thither ; now, in view of the enemy's entry into Albert and his approach to the Ancre south of the town, he began to fear more for his right than for his left. At 7 P.M. he ordered the 17th Divn—which had been moved northward from Hénencourt ( $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles west of Albert), where it had re-organized,

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 137, tells us : "Albert is the enticing objective of the 3rd Marine and 54th Reserve Divisions. In the second and third hours of the afternoon the pursuers appear at the foot of the last heights before Albert, and the tower of the cathedral, with the twisted iron of its summit hanging downwards, stands out sharply against the western sky. . . . The divisions attack, the Marine directly westwards and the 54th Reserve south of the town [sic]. Officers' patrols report Albert apparently weakly held, but that from the heights to the west machine-gun fire is sweeping the town". The entry was made about 5 P.M. and after (purely imaginary) street fighting, the British are said to have been driven out.

<sup>2</sup> Goes, p. 138, admits that attempts to advance beyond the railway embankment broke down under machine-gun fire. Only a small bridge-head was gained, in the VII. Corps area, opposite Méaulte. He attributes the failure to the Germans, who had had no rations for 48 hours, finding plenty of supplies, "also drink", in Albert.

to Senlis<sup>1</sup>—to reconnoitre the high ground west of the Ancre between Dernancourt and Albert, and drive off any of the enemy who might be discovered there, so as to safeguard the right of the corps. Major-General Robertson allotted the task to the 52nd Bde, and ordered the 51st Bde to Millencourt in support. The 52nd moved to the high ground south-east of Millencourt, where it was in position by 9 P.M.; soon afterwards it established touch with the headquarters of the 35th Brigade in Bouzincourt, as well as with those of the 27th Bde (9th Divn, VII. Corps).

The 51st and 52nd Bdes remained on the alert all night, but their services were not required. At 7.30 P.M., as the enemy was then in possession of Albert and believed to be moving northwards from the town, Lieut.-General Fanshawe had telephoned to Major-General Lawrie that the 63rd Divn must stop any enemy progress and block the avenues of approach to the flank of the corps between Albert and Bouzincourt. At the moment the 188th and 189th Bdes were in the act of withdrawing from the front line, so the 190th Bde, then in reserve on the left of the corps at Englebelmer (to which place the other two brigades were to proceed on relief), was instructed to form a defensive flank from the Ancre at Aveluy to Bouzincourt. The 188th Bde, which was to be concentrated at Martinsart by Br.-General Coleridge, was designated as support.

At 10 P.M. the situation seemed to be well in hand, the Germans at Albert doing no more than make a great noise, sending up light balls, and firing machine guns and light trench mortars from the outskirts of the town. At 10.15 P.M., therefore, the 63rd Divn instructed the 190th Bde, then spread out from Bouzincourt to Aveluy, to make enquiry of the 35th Brigade and, if things were satisfactory, to billet at Bouzincourt within easy reach. At 10.30 P.M., however, the enemy again launched attacks along both the Amiens and the Bouzincourt roads. Fighting swayed backwards and forwards as attack and counter-attack had the advantage, the 7/Suffolk, 7/Norfolk and 9/Essex of the 35th Brigade offering astonishing resistance to the greater part of two German divisions. But by 12.15 A.M. on the 27th the German enveloping movement

<sup>1</sup> It had reached there by 7 P.M., being bombed on arrival in bright moonlight by low-flying aeroplanes, soon after the 47th Divn had left to rest in villages behind Acheux (4 miles N.N.W. of Senlis), that is, behind the gap.

was making itself felt, and the right of the 35th Brigade was forced to drop back about three hundred yards in order to escape enfilade machine-gun fire. Br.-General Vincent then called on Br.-General Hutchison for assistance, but the 190th Bde was still spread out along the defensive flank, so that in view of the lateness of the hour, 2 A.M., it was arranged that the counter-attack should take place in the morning. By this time the Germans had gained sufficient experience of the resistance to be expected of the men of the Eastern counties ; the fire of their attack died down, and the 35th Brigade maintained its position without assistance for the remainder of the night.

Whilst these events were taking place, a heavy attack was launched, at 1 A.M., against the 37th Brigade, in the left sector of the 12th Division. Crossing the Ancre at Authuille the Germans pushed forward half a mile to Mesnil, and south-westwards towards Martinsart. The 188th Bde, then in billets at the latter place, was roused, and counter-attacked the Germans in flank in co-operation with the 37th Brigade ; it completely overcame the enemy and took fifty prisoners and 13 machine guns. The 189th Bde at Englebelmer was also roused, but was not engaged. During the 26th,<sup>1</sup> therefore, the whole line of the V. Corps front had held.

#### *IV. Corps*

There was on the morning of the 26th a wide gap<sup>2</sup> on the right of the IV. Corps, affording access to the large shallow valley which projected into the British line and was surrounded by the heights marked by Serre, Hébuterne, Gommecourt and Bucquoy ; in this valley lay Puisieux.

In consequence of this gap, the V. Corps, as we have seen, had formed a defensive flank in the IV. Corps area by means of the 2nd Divn. On the other side of the gap, the IV. Corps held the Bucquoy—Ablainzevelle position, with two brigades of the 62nd (Major-General W. P. Braithwaite), and two brigades of the 42nd Division

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 137, says the attack was made by battalions of the 54th Reserve Division, and attributes the failure against the V. Corps to the difficulties of crossing the devastated area. He probably means that this prevented the Germans from bringing up an overwhelming weight of artillery or infantry.

<sup>2</sup> The gap happened to be just at the boundary of the German Second and Seventeenth Armies, which ran just south of Serre and Colincamps. North of it there were nine divisions moving against the IV. Corps and the Serre gap, and south of it, only one (*21st Reserve Division*) against the 2nd Divn.

(Major-General A. Solly-Flood), in touch with the VI. Corps, the 187th and 125th Brigades being in support. The other four divisions of the corps, the 19th, 25th, 41st and 51st, which had suffered very severely in the fighting of the previous days, were close up in reserve, the 19th being at Hébuterne, with the 41st north and the 51st west of it, and the 25th behind the centre of the 62nd and 42nd. The right flank of the 62nd Division, on the end of the long spur which runs from Gommecourt south-eastward to within five hundred yards of Puisieux, was entirely in the air. If, therefore, the Germans pressed forward into the gap with determination, there was danger that they would make a decisive breach in the line before reinforcements in the shape of the New Zealand and 4th Australian Divisions, now on their way, could arrive.

The 62nd Division, tired after its night march to the front and a day's fighting and a night's retirement, had hardly settled on its new position, when at 8.45 A.M. in the morning mist, the Germans<sup>1</sup> attacked Bucquoy. They were stopped by fire a quarter of a mile from the British line; but other parties were reported advancing in many lines towards Puisieux,<sup>2</sup> and at 8.30 A.M. these had entered that village and were in occupation of the high ground immediately south of it. There was barely time, the Germans being so close, for the 186th Brigade, on the right of the line, to form a defensive flank, and this the enemy endeavoured to envelop,<sup>3</sup> so that the pioneer battalion (1/9th Durham L.I.), in support, was moved up to extend the flank. In the course of time, the attack, in spite of its weight, forced the defence back only slightly, and by 11.30 A.M. the flank ran due west to Rossignol Wood.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, Major-General Jeffreys (19th Divn) then in Hébuterne, hearing the heavy firing to the eastward, had sent out patrols of mounted officers and men of the divisional and attached artillery to explore the gap to the south of the village and to ascertain the enemy's movements. Soon after 10 A.M. one patrol brought back infor-

<sup>1</sup> They belonged to the 5th Bav. Division (from second line), which also attacked Ablainzevelle (Goes, p. 182). The repulse of two attacks is admitted.

<sup>2</sup> The XIV. Reserve Corps of six divisions deployed in three echelons, the 4th and the 3rd Guard now leading.

<sup>3</sup> Part of the 3rd Guard Division turned northwards for the purpose.

<sup>4</sup> Goes, p. 183, says that Bucquoy was found "untakeable" either from east or south; the left, the 3rd Guard Division, having reached Puisieux, halted.

mation that large forces of the enemy were advancing west and south of Serre.<sup>1</sup> The alarm was instantly given. Two brigades of the 19th Divn (its total strength was approximately eighteen hundred) reinforced the outpost line covering Hébuterne in the trenches of the Purple Line, south and east of the village ; the 41st Divn was assembled on the left ; finally the line was extended later to half a mile north of Essarts by the 25th Divn. The 51st Divn, which at 9 A.M. had started to march westwards to Souastre for rest, was brought back to form an outpost position south-east of that village, on the right of the 19th. A more or less continuous line from near Souastre to Hébuterne and Essarts now confronted the Germans, and it was supported by many batteries sweeping the ground to the south and south-east of Hébuterne. The Germans advancing on that village were thus brought to a standstill,<sup>2</sup> and nothing further of importance occurred in the area during the rest of the day.

In the meantime, the return of the mounted patrols—which were mistaken for German cavalry—and the removal for safety towards Souastre of some agricultural machines drawn by Ford tractors—which were reported as German armoured cars that had broken through—caused considerable alarm and panic behind the front line. Stragglers, non-combatant troops and civilians fled along the roads leading north and westwards from Hébuterne, spreading alarm and consternation. A staff officer of the IV. Corps rang up 25th Divn headquarters with the news that the Germans were in Hébuterne, so that they must leave Fonquevillers at once. The 4th Australian Division (Major-General E. G. Sinclair-Maclagan), which was near Basseux (6 miles north-east of Souastre), with its 4th Brigade at Saulty ( $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles N.N.W. of Souastre), was ordered, about 11 A.M., to occupy the high ground between Souastre and Bienvillers. The 4th Brigade was detailed for the task, and by 2 P.M. was digging in. By this time, however, the alarm was quite over, for mounted officers sent from the fighting units soon discovered that the Germans had not broken through.

At 12.30 P.M., Lieut.-General Harper, who had not

<sup>1</sup> The head of the 4th *Division* reached Serre by 8 A.M., it had started from east of Irles soon after 1 A.M., and, owing to trenches and wire, it had taken seven hours to cover six miles.

<sup>2</sup> Goss says no more than that "Regiment von Kluck" tumbled into a small fight near Hébuterne.

communicated to his divisions General Byng's 2.20 A.M. warning order for retreat north-westwards, gave instructions that the present line was to be maintained if possible, but, if forced to retreat, the corps would next fight on the position Courcelles au Bois—Hébuterne—Gommecourt—Essarts—Adinfer Wood. Except on the right, this was practically the line on which the 51st, 19th, 41st and 25th Divns were then established.

Against the defensive flank east of Rossignol Wood and against Bucquoy, the Germans continued to press fiercely, making no less than five separate attacks between midday and 6 P.M., whilst the shelling was continuous and heavy. The telephone lines were cut with such regularity that the headquarters of the 62nd Division, which were in Gommecourt, were forced to move to Fonquevillers. The defence was greatly assisted by a hundred specialist machine gunners with machine guns, brought from the Machine Gun School by the Commandant, Lieut.-Colonel W. E. Ironside. Once only did the Germans set foot in Bucquoy, then to be promptly driven out with some loss in prisoners by a counter-attack of the 127th Brigade: even so it was found necessary to bring into the line part of the reserve brigade of the 62nd Division and the last brigade reserves.

A final desperate attack made from Puisieux to break through the defensive flank near Rossignol Wood began about 7 P.M., and heavy fighting followed. Two companies of the 10th Tank Battalion had been lying behind the line most of the day ready for emergencies. One of these had been withdrawn at 6 P.M., but the remaining eleven tanks now advanced to the top of the Gommecourt spur and, firing from there, dispersed the enemy. Thus against the 62nd and 42nd Divisions the enemy made no progress, and, as one German account says, "the name 'Bucquoy' brings painful remembrances".<sup>1</sup>

At 4.25 P.M. the IV. Corps directed the 4th Australian Brigade to move forward to Hébuterne, where, between 7 and 9 P.M., it relieved the 19th Divn.

On the southern side of the Serre gap, against which the Germans did not appear so early nor bring so much force as against the northern, it was not until 9.30 A.M. that the 2nd Divn observed two enemy battalions moving down the Ancre valley from Miraumont. At this time Auchonvillers, on the left, was held only by observers of

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 133.

the 5th Bde and Lieut.-Colonel W. C. Smith's composite battalion ;<sup>1</sup> but the arrival of the leading troops of the New Zealand Division soon brought a most welcome addition.

The headquarters of the New Zealand Division had reached Hedauville ( $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles north-west of Albert) from Ribemont at 1.30 A.M. ; part of the Machine Gun Battalion was already there, and by daylight the 1st Rifles (1st Battalion, 3rd N.Z. Rifle Brigade) arrived, having marched the ten miles from Pont Noyelles in the dark. Three other battalions were at Ribemont, with orders to march immediately. The bulk of the New Zealand Division had still been west of Amiens on the evening of the 25th, delayed by a shortage of lorries ; it was now pushing forward in light marching order, without greatcoats and packs, and carrying all possible ammunition. Major-General Russell had received orders from the Third Army at 10 P.M. to establish a line between Hamel (left of the VII. Corps) and Puisieux (supposed right of the IV. Corps). Soon after 2 A.M. on the 26th the IV. Corps instructed him to move further northward through Mailly Maillet to the line Hamel—Serre to close the gap : if the Germans were encountered, they were to be pushed back and every effort made to connect with the right of the 62nd, described as being about Puisieux, and to cover its flank : if the Germans were met in greatly superior numbers, their advance was to be checked, and the general line Colincamps—Hébuterne, three miles in rear and to the left of Hamel—Serre, was to be reached and held.

Realizing the urgency of the occasion and the impossibility of giving time to concentrate even brigades, Major-General Russell decided to send forward the units piecemeal as they arrived. He ordered Lieut.-Colonel A. C. Stewart, temporarily commanding the 3rd N.Z. Rifle Brigade, to despatch the 1st Rifles northward at 6 A.M. to hold the high ground east of Englebelmer—Auchonvillers as a screen to cover the deployment of the division : the 1st and 2nd N.Z. Brigades, when they arrived, were to reach the line Hamel—Hébuterne, and then to swing forward their left to Puisieux : the remainder of the 3rd N.Z. Brigade, on arrival, was to occupy the high ground Colincamps—Hébuterne mentioned in IV. Corps orders.

Soon after 9 A.M. the 1st Rifles had passed through

<sup>1</sup> Formed the previous afternoon of about four hundred men, mainly reinforcements and personnel of the Corps schools.

Mailly Maillet, and the first clash came about eleven o'clock when, about a quarter of a mile east of Auchonvillers, the advanced parties met and drove back enemy patrols which had worked round the left of the 2nd Divn. Touch was now obtained with that division, and an outpost line was established on the Englebelmer—Auchonvillers ridge. Opposition was encountered only by the platoon on the extreme left—near the sugar factory at a road junction a couple of thousand yards east of Colincamps. There the Germans were in superior force,<sup>1</sup> but the New Zealanders, although much outnumbered, held on and kept the enemy back until reinforcements arrived an hour later.

To the north-east German troops could be seen marching on Serre ; but, except for the shelling of the right of the 2nd Divn by six German batteries near Grandcourt, and the fighting near the sugar factory, quiet prevailed on the southern side of the gap, for the German corps (*XXXIX. Reserve*) opposite to it did not press on.<sup>2</sup> Towards 1 P.M. the enemy (the left of the *4th Division, XIV. Reserve Corps*) put down a smoke barrage on Colincamps and pushed two battalions<sup>3</sup> towards the village, enfilading and firing into the rear of the New Zealanders near the sugar factory, who had to throw back a defensive flank. Though the enemy's machine guns were knocked out by a section of the 15th Battery R.F.A. (2nd Divn.), the situation remained critical. At this moment, however, twelve "whippet" tanks of the 3rd Tank Battalion suddenly appeared from Colincamps, which they had reached at midday, and where there were only two infantry posts of the 51st Divn.<sup>4</sup> Debouching from the northern end of the village, they produced an instantaneous effect. Some three hundred of the enemy, about to enter it in close formation from the east, fled in panic. A number of others, finding their retreat cut off, surrendered to some infantry of the 51st Divn which had come up, whilst another detachment probably amounting to a company was chased southwards towards Auchonvillers, suffer-

<sup>1</sup> The left battalion of the *4th Division*.

<sup>2</sup> By nightfall, the *21st Reserve Division*, its right division, had barely reached Beaucourt, in front of the 2nd Divn line. *Goes*, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Of the regiment which was attacking the sugar factory.

<sup>4</sup> It was the first appearance of whippet tanks in action. They were six feet shorter than the "heavy" pattern, and weighed approximately half (15 tons). The engine was in front, under an armoured bonnet, the crew of three men in a small cab in rear. The armament consisted of four Hotchkiss machine guns, one of which was spare, and the average speed was six miles per hour.

ing many casualties and losing four machine guns. Two German battalions had now been accounted for. "In 'the last moment, the tank attack had prevented the 'German break-through.'"<sup>1</sup> The third enemy battalion continued to hold on near the sugar factory, whilst from One Tree Hill, a hill north-west of Beaumont Hamel with a single tree on it, came effective enemy machine-gun fire.

The main body of the New Zealand Division was now beginning to arrive. At 2.15 P.M. the 1st (really a composite) Brigade deployed out of Mailly Maillet, followed by the 2nd, which was to go forward on its right and occupy the ground actually held by the 2nd Divn. The 2nd Brigade accomplished its task without difficulty, except that the left on advancing beyond Auchonvillers suffered some casualties by fire from One Tree Hill. It did not seem feasible, however, for the 1st to advance beyond the left of the 2nd, so as to cover the ground between it and Hébuterne, until the Germans near the sugar factory, One Tree Hill and La Signy Farm should be cleared away. It was therefore determined to attack astride the Mailly Maillet—Serre road, on which the sugar factory stood, and to reach Serre, at the same time clearing Colincamps, on the left, of any enemy that might still be there. Owing to the change of plan, it was 5.30 P.M. before the attack, which lacked any definite artillery support, was under way.

Advancing with great spirit, the 1st New Zealand Brigade drove back the German posts and managed to get nearly abreast of the 2nd, with its left near Colincamps; but a storm of machine-gun bullets prevented further progress during daylight. After dark, another advance of three hundred yards was made, and forty prisoners and eight machine guns were captured. Then, as the troops had been on the move or in action continuously for nearly thirty-six hours and without sleep for two nights, they were allowed to rest. The exhausted 2nd Divn was relieved, and went back to Mailly Maillet. Investigation then showed that the position of the New Zealand Division was by no means secure, since the enemy was in Serre, while there still existed a gap between Colincamps and Hébuterne. It was necessary to call on the men for a further effort.

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 185. "Regt. No. 14" (*4th Division*) further says: "the 'advance was continued uninterruptedly past Serre to Colincamps, which 'was reached about 2.30 P.M. Here the British resistance helped by tanks 'was so strong that the advance stopped. The regiment spent the night 'at La Signy Farm, east of Colincamps". The farm is, in fact, 1½ miles east of Colincamps.

At 1 A.M. on the 27th, the freshest of the New Zealand troops, formed into a new composite brigade, left Mailly Maillet to extend northwards, and reached Colincamps at 4 A.M. At daylight they advanced, and, although they encountered some machine-gun fire, they continued on without a pause until, at 6.30 A.M., touch had been gained on the left with the 4th Australian Brigade in Hébuterne, and on the right with the 1st New Zealand Brigade. The gap had been closed.

The 26th March, therefore, had proved a satisfactory day for the IV. just as it had for the V. Corps. Nowhere had the Germans gained any advantage, although for a long time a wide gap had lain open in front of them. They were now confronted by a continuous line.

#### *VI. Corps*

The gap in the line of the VI. Corps (Lieut.-General Sir A. Haldane) near Moyenneville, between the 31st and Guards Divisions amounted to some fifteen hundred yards and it was discovered soon after daylight. It had been caused, as will be remembered, by two battalions (18/Durham L.I. and 18/York and Lancaster) of the 93rd Brigade (31st Division) being misdirected by a staff officer during the night retirement of the corps, and falling back in the early morning over the Ablainzevelle—Boisieux position to the Purple Line, two miles and more behind it.

Immediate efforts were made to close the gap ; Major-General Feilding (Guards Division) offered to extend his front to the right to cover a part, while the 15th/17th West Yorkshire,<sup>1</sup> the one battalion of the 93rd Brigade in the line, prolonged its left. The two absent battalions of the 93rd Brigade were sent forward, covered by a reconnaissance party, in the hope, although it was now daylight, that they would be able to reach their correct position. But the enemy,<sup>2</sup> also, had discovered that Moyenneville was unoccupied, and pushing into the village, had already gained the top of the ridge to the south-west, whence he enfiladed the line of the West Yorkshire. When, therefore, the two battalions tried to advance, they encountered considerable machine-gun fire, and finally dug in on high ground a couple of thousand yards north-west of Moyenne-

<sup>1</sup> The 15th and 17th Battalions had been amalgamated on the re-organization of battalions in December 1917.

<sup>2</sup> Apparently the advanced guard company of a battalion.

ville. Lieut.-Colonel S. C. Taylor<sup>1</sup> of the 15th/17th West Yorkshire, instead of withdrawing, organized a counter-attack eastwards with his reserves. Part of them moved north of the village and part directly against the ridge occupied by the Germans. The result was entirely successful; the enemy was driven off the high ground and out of the village, and, taken in flank during his retirement by the party which had moved round by the north, he suffered over a hundred casualties. In addition thirty-five men hoisted the white flag and surrendered.<sup>2</sup> To conclude the fighting at Moyenneville: about 12.30 P.M. the enemy attacked the village in larger numbers, supported by artillery fire, and compelled the 15th/17th West Yorkshire, which had not been reinforced, to fall back to its western edge. Instructions were then given for the West Yorkshire and the 13/York and Lancaster to launch a counter-attack at 8.30 P.M., but the former battalion, exhausted by the previous fighting, requested time for rest, and the orders were cancelled. It was then arranged that the 13/York and Lancaster and the 18/Durham L.I. should advance under cover of darkness and dig in as close to Moyenneville as possible. These orders arrived so very late that by the time the battalions approached the village, dawn was breaking; so abandoning the project they returned to their morning positions of the 26th. The Germans, therefore, were left in occupation of Moyenneville; but the West Yorkshire, supported by a company of the 2/Irish Guards sent from the 4th Guards Brigade, clung to their position round it.

Further north, opposite the Guards Division, the Germans<sup>3</sup> had followed up the withdrawal closely during the night; in the early morning they drove in the out-lying piquets, and throughout the day continued to dribble forward small parties into the two villages on the Guards front, Boiry Becquerelle and Boyelles. Their further

<sup>1</sup> He was promoted in April to command the 93rd Brigade.

<sup>2</sup> Sergeant A. Mountain of the 15th/17th West Yorkshire received the V.C. for his services on this occasion.

The enemy belonged to the 21st Bav. Res. Regt. of the 16th Bav. Division, whose proper front lay to the south of Moyenneville. The 239th Division, in whose sector Moyenneville lay, had apparently not pushed on sufficiently fast. "Bav. Regt. No. 21", says: "On leaving Courcelles [3,000 yards "south of Moyenneville] the regiment ran into the fire of well placed "machine guns on the Ablainzevelle—Moyenneville ridge. The 466th "Regt. (239th Division) had not got on so fast, and that endangered our "right flank. Even by prolonging the line to the right touch was not "found, so that parts of No. 4 Company (I. Battalion) and the battalion "staff were taken prisoner in the counter-attack which followed".

<sup>3</sup> 221st and 6th Bav. Divisions.

action on the VI. Corps front was discouraged by a counter-preparation lasting  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hours against the line Hamelincourt—Boyelles, fired by the twelve 6-inch and eight 60-pdr. batteries of the corps heavy artillery. In the course of the afternoon the Germans brought up some field guns southwest of Boyelles and on the slopes east of Moyenneville; but they did nothing further against the Guards Division or the 3rd Division (Major-General C. J. Deverell) north of it.<sup>1</sup>

The main trouble in the VI. Corps on the 26th March was occasioned, not by the enemy, but by the rumours, already mentioned, that he had broken through the IV. Corps at Hébuterne, and that his armoured cars were moving on Souastre. Information to this effect reached Lieut.-General Haldane from various sources towards 10 A.M., when he had already received instructions from the Third Army to shift his headquarters back north-westwards from Pas to Tinques (13 miles N.N.W. of Arras). Transport and panic-stricken civilians—a few soldiers among them—were streaming through Pas in some confusion, and the officers of the Q branch of the corps staff went out to re-establish order.

As a precaution, Lieut.-General Haldane ordered the corps reinforcements under Lieut.-Colonel W. H. Occleston, which were then at Mondicourt (7 miles north-west of Hébuterne) to move forward and block the roads, while his General Staff instructed Major-General Bridgford (31st Division) to go back with his headquarters to a convenient centre and organize any troops which were drifting back. To the 40th Divn, in reserve, orders were given for the establishment of a defensive right flank, parallel to the southern boundary of the corps, with the right resting on the Souastre—Bienvillers road, and the left south of Adinfer Wood. A battalion (4/Grenadier Guards) of the 4th Guards Brigade of the 31st Division, which had occupied and fortified Quesnoy Farm, and was in contact with its own brigade, was instructed to get in touch with the 40th Divn on its right. On information brought by Major-General G. D. Jeffreys (19th Divn), the 177th Bde marching from

<sup>1</sup> On this day the 34th and 59th Divns left the VI. Corps for rest in the L. of C. areas. The former (less artillery) moved back from Le Cauroy (15 miles north-west of Hébuterne) to Auxi le Chateau (30 miles west of Arras). The latter (less artillery and the 177th Bde, which at daybreak was at Quesnoy Farm, 4 miles N.N.E. of Hébuterne) went to Candas (20 miles N.N.W. of Albert). The 40th Divn (Major-General J. Ponsonby), in reserve, was at the beginning of the day about four miles north of Hébuterne, with its artillery still in action.

Fonquevillers, just north of Hébuterne, to Sailly au Bois on relief, occupied the trenches there, prolonging the line of the 56th Bde (19th Divn) westwards. In the midst of these counter-measures, the enemy renewed his attack on Moyenneville, as has been related. Very soon after the rumours of an enemy break-through at Hébuterne were ascertained to be false, and anxiety being allayed, the rest of the afternoon passed quietly on the front and in the back areas of the corps.

The orders issued to the VI. Corps by the Third Army at 2.20 A.M.<sup>1</sup> had directed it to fall back if compelled to do so, in a north-westerly direction. At 4.10 P.M., Lieut.-General Haldane received the 3.40 P.M. order stopping a general retirement, and giving west and not north-west as the direction of any forced local withdrawal. By this hour the enemy pressure had become slight, and there was no necessity for any rearward movement.

The 177th Bde was ordered to return northward to Bienvillers, and at 9.30 P.M. the 40th Divn was authorised to withdraw into rest 7 miles north-westward, but the 119th and 120th Bdes remained east of Adinfer Wood until the early morning of the 27th.

### XVII. Corps

Although a considerable amount of gun fire on both sides took place along the front of the XVII. Corps (4th and 15th Divisions), and the corps heavy artillery fired on bodies of troops reported by the R.F.C. and on villages in the back areas, there were no attacks. Patrols sent out on the night of the 25th/26th reported that the enemy south of the Scarpe was much on the alert. It was anticipated that the Germans would attack within a day or two, and harassing fire to impede any troop concentrations was kept up throughout the night of the 26th/27th.

Of the total of 58 squadrons of the Royal Flying Corps available on the 26th, 34 were co-operating with the Third and only 10 with the Fifth Army; and of the latter small total, three squadrons were sent up at an early hour to assist the Third Army, but were returned in the course of the morning. The air activities were again directed mainly towards low bombing and machine-gun attacks, no less than 27 squadrons being specifically employed against

<sup>1</sup> See page 508.

ground targets on the Third Army front ; those of the Ninth Wing specially against the concentration of German troops west of Bapaume. It is now known that several ammunition and supply columns at Pozières station were destroyed, and that many direct hits were scored on convoys on the roads. In the Fifth Army area all squadrons were called on to stem the enemy advance in the vicinity of Roye.

The enemy air activity was comparatively slight ; no advantage was taken by him of the extraordinary targets offered by the masses of retreating transport on the roads behind the British front. On the Fifth Army front the only decisive combats appear to have been fought by No. 24 Squadron, which shot down four enemy planes engaged in low-flying work ; on the Third Army front, 18 were brought down. The total Flying Corps casualties of all kinds on the battle front were 13 aeroplanes missing, 26 wrecked and 11 (unserviceable) burnt or abandoned.

There was a certain amount of night bombing on the 26th/27th, particular attention being paid to Ham, Cambrai, Bapaume, Péronne and Albert, as well as villages occupied by the enemy.

#### REVIEW OF THE SITUATION

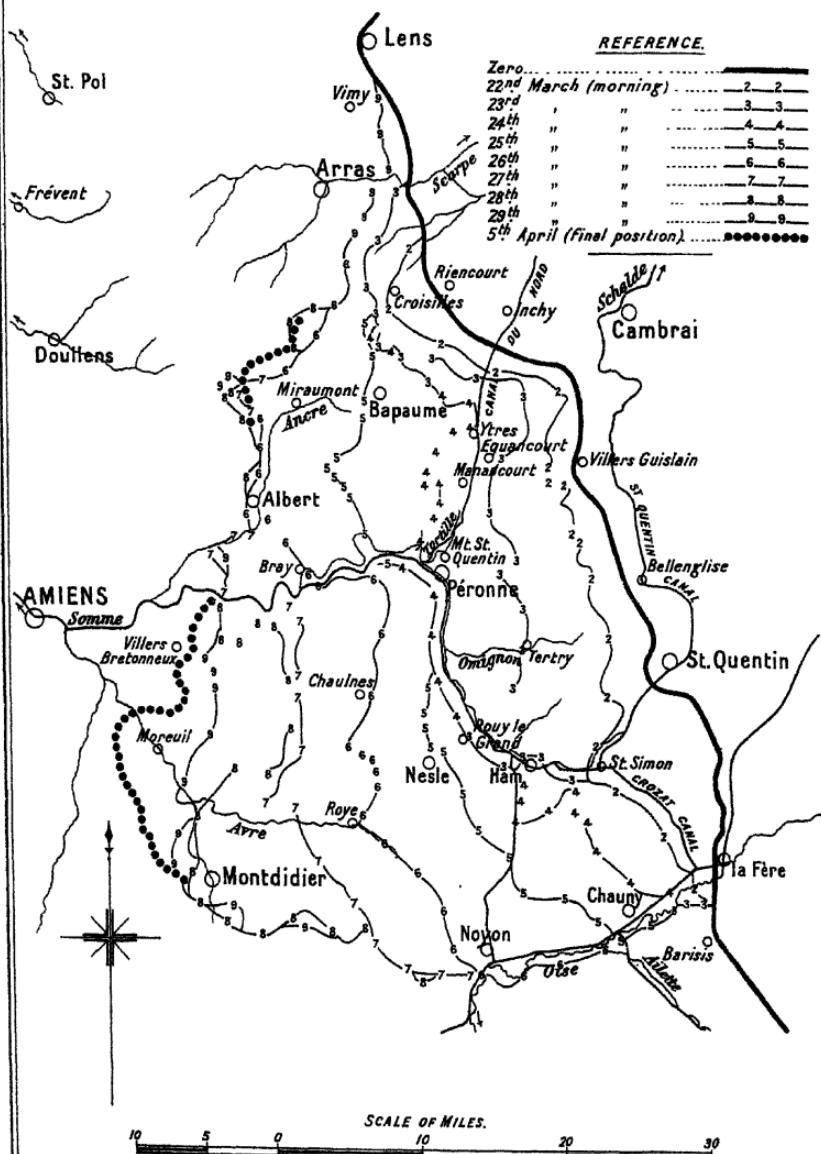
On this day the crisis on the front of the Third Army may be said to have ended, and also on that of the XVIII. and XIX. Corps, these formations being all that remained in the line of the Fifth Army except the portion of the III. Corps away on the extreme right of the battle front near the Oise. Had it not been for the unnecessary swing back of the VII. Corps from Bray to Sailly le Sec, which left a long transverse gap along the Somme, between its right and the left of the XIX. Corps, the British line would have been quite continuous. Everything now depended on the French, whose divisions, newly arrived on the ground, and with little artillery, no supplies or ammunition columns, had retired after offering what resistance they could. The most disquieting feature in their movements was the fact that they were disposed to withdraw southwards, if not south-eastwards, away from the British ; but this was soon to be remedied.

It was obvious that the Germans, at any rate on the British front, were tiring : they had failed within the



# GERMAN ADVANCE BY DAYS

## March 1918.



allotted time to traverse the area which they had deliberately devastated in 1917 and reach their desired objectives ; the transport could not keep up with the marching troops ; the men were exhausted by the exertions of crossing the obstacles of trenches, craters and wire on the old Somme battlefield. Without much artillery support —few batteries had been able to follow the infantry over the difficult ground—without ammunition supply, and, as is now known, without rations for 48 hours, the German infantrymen of the attacking divisions were nearing the limit of their powers. In particular, they had been unable to reap advantage from the many gaps in the British line, although they had made desperate efforts to do so. As a German writer<sup>1</sup> has said, the last opportunity to break through had been lost—"the Somme desert "had spoken its last inexorable and mighty word". It was a strange but fitting Nemesis that the devastations of 1917, a mere exhibition of spite and "frightfulness" which had not perceptibly delayed the British advance,<sup>2</sup> should distinctly contribute to the German failure in 1918.

Whilst the enemy's physical exertions were perceptibly weakening, his morale was failing, as was shown by the increasing number of small surrenders and by the changed attitude of the prisoners, arrogant on the 21st and 22nd March, confident of victory on the succeeding days, and now on the 26th bewailing the loss of their comrades, and, at heart, indifferent to the outcome of the battle. In the great majority of the British units, on the other hand, morale had actually improved. The junior officers and N.C.O.'s had begun to feel conscious that they had emerged from their ordeal unbeaten in spirit and still ready to fight ; they had learnt much in a few days of open warfare, and were better prepared for further fighting of this nature ; the constant change to new scenes had refreshed their efforts, and, above all, the decrease in artillery fire had relieved the strain on their nerves, always severely tried in the constant and accurate bombardments of trench warfare.

Throughout the operations one factor contributed as much as anything else to the general dislocation of the machinery of command, and to considerable sarcasm, if

<sup>1</sup> Goes, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, had the Germans not demolished the houses, there would have been no material on the spot to repair the roads for the British transport to use.

not despondency, among the troops. This factor was the movement to the rear—"going out of the line", as the troops call it—often on the slightest provocation, of corps and divisional headquarters, with long processions of vehicles, plainly labelled, carrying their equipment and accumulated possessions. Some divisional commanders, it is true, moved their fighting headquarters forward; others shifted them to a flank instead of to the rear, when they were bombed or shelled, and their near presence exercised a steady effect on the brigadiers and others under them. But this was the exception; and actually, in some cases, corps commanders ordered the divisions under them to move their headquarters back.

**Sketch 20.** The battle was now becoming stabilized, and after the 26th March the enemy, although he made desperate and despairing efforts, gained from the British no ground worth mentioning. Reinforcements had now appeared and the idea of defeat, never very potent, was fading away. None of the fighting troops were pessimistic, although at times the situation had been felt to be serious and there had been momentary weaknesses, when rumours of defeat and disaster had been more than insistent. There were panics it is true, but, excepting at Hébuterne, these had occurred only in the back areas among the semi-military and non-combatant units. Straggling was general, and was unavoidable in fighting which took place practically at ground level, units being almost invisible at times, hidden in trenches, shell craters and behind cover, and hard to find. These conditions made the transmission of orders particularly difficult. It was not an uncommon sight to see some scores of men in a village, hopelessly lost; yet, after a little rest, the same men would answer the call of any officer to follow him back into action. Leave had been stopped on the 20th March, and the thousands of men returning to France from leave were wandering over the countryside in search of their units, which added not a little to the apparent confusion. The establishment, about the 25th, of stragglers' posts soon helped to put matters straight; many of these posts, however, were placed too far forward, and it is probable that had there been more than one line, the results would have been better.

Road control hardly existed for the first few days, and the evacuation of the civilian population added to the normal difficulties of the areas behind a battlefield: the

roads were choked with a mixture of transport of all natures and civilians' carts loaded with goods and chattels. This was gradually remedied by improved supervision and by providing cross-country tracks to relieve the roads, but throughout these days more mounted men were required for traffic control.

There was really no shortage of rations, for when supplies did not come up from the divisional refilling points owing to the congestion on the roads, collecting parties were sent out and generally managed to discover food in canteens and stores, in abandoned dumps or in the villages. Water was insufficient throughout the retreat, and horses suffered in the many waterless areas passed over.

The ammunition supply was excellent, the usual refilling system by lorries continued and, in addition, mounted officers were used by divisions to discover, or improvise, dumps and report where they were. Although the Fifth Army with ever-dwindling numbers was falling back towards its sources of supply, difficulties were occasioned by the constant changes of railheads—unsuitable refilling points being selected by the map—and sometimes by the lack of lorries. Empty ones were too frequently commandeered by passing officers for every imaginable task, regardless of the fact that they were on their way to draw ammunition or supplies.

All the casualty clearing stations were withdrawn in good time and none were captured; but the evacuation of wounded from the forward posts was rendered difficult by the congestion on the roads, motor ambulances often taking 24 hours for a return journey which, in ordinary circumstances, would have been completed in three or four hours.

The removal of aerodromes and workshops was begun on the 21st March, and valuable stores and spare parts were saved thereby, with the result that much repair work could be carried on without serious fear of interruption. One workshop per division for repairs of motor transport was retained as an advanced workshop, with one lorry to carry first-aid stores and execute running repairs. The Ordnance Gun Parks kept, as it was said, "open house", and were able to supply most demands; lorries with important "spares" were kept in advanced positions and proved most useful.

The reserve of battle and trench stores held both by the R.E. and by the Ordnance was so large that it proved im-

possible to clear all the dumps ; so when it became necessary to abandon any of them, they were set on fire or destroyed by explosives. The same course was followed as regards Expeditionary Force Canteens and officers' and other clubs. After salvage of all that it was possible to remove passing troops were invited to help themselves, so that some lucky units found themselves enjoying corona cigars and other such luxuries. But in spite of it all, the Germans were still able to discover a mass of food and to them many unheard of "delikatessen". Seeing that they had been informed the British were starving as a result of the submarine blockade, such windfalls, in the end, contributed to depress their already waning morale.

#### NOTE

#### THE GERMANS ON THE 26TH MARCH

On the 26th March the general direction of the two northern German Armies of attack, the *Second* and *Seventeenth*, was still due west ; the *Eighteenth Army* opened out fanwise, its northern boundary, some six miles south of the Somme at Péronne, running west, but its southern one, near Chauny, pointing nearly south-west. The general front attained during the day presented two salients, one south of the Somme in the Roye area, and the other near Albert ; between them came a re-entrant, formed by the left front of the XIX. Corps on the Somme. In consequence of its progress, the *Eighteenth Army* formed a defensive flank along the Oise from Chauny to Noyon, the *Seventh Army* finding troops for the rest of the new flank east of Chauny. The *Seventeenth Army* (opposite to the IV., VI. and XVII. Corps) met with very determined resistance,<sup>1</sup> but it was hoped, with the aid of the *Second Army* on the south, which had not encountered so much opposition, and of new attacks—"Mars" and "Valkyrie"—by the *Sixth*

*Sketch 6. Army* on the north, that the *Seventeenth* would be able to get going again. The operations against the French seemed to offer great opportunities, the right wing of the *Eighteenth Army* having advanced more than nine miles, it is claimed, without meeting much resistance.

In view of the progress achieved, and of the German doctrine of exploiting the enemy's weak spot, Ludendorff, on the evening of the 26th, definitely translated into orders his ideas for the continuance of the battle. Underestimating his opponents, the orders involved, as General von Kuhl says, "a renewed widening of the already wide—"stretched frame of the operations. . . . The offensive power of the "Armies, as was soon to be proved, was no longer sufficient for all "these tasks".

<sup>1</sup> Ludendorff, speaking on the telephone to Crown Prince Rupprecht, was very discontented with the progress of the *Seventeenth Army* : "He was quite beside himself and dissatisfied with the Chief of the Staff, whom "he talked of removing from his post". Rupprecht, ii. p. 357.

The *Seventeenth Army* was to continue to press westwards on Doullens—St. Pol, with assistance from the attacks between Lens and La Bassée, “Mars North” and “Valkyrie”, while the *Sixth Army* arranged to fill any gap between the attacks.

The *Second Army*, making its principal effort south of the Somme, where it actually had only two divisions on a very wide front, was to push forward to the Avre with its left on Moreuil (9 miles south-east of Amiens), capture Amiens with its centre, and swing its right round across the lower Somme so as to reach Airaines (17 miles W.N.W. of Amiens). It would then face south-west on the line Moreuil—Airaines.

The *Eighteenth Army* was to continue its progress from Noyon—Chaulnes south-westwards to the Avre, and seize the passages of the river with a view to a further advance, which was not to take place except by order of O.H.L.<sup>1</sup>. It was to be strongly echeloned on the left, so that it would be ready to advance south-westwards to the line Compiègne (14 miles south-west of Noyon)—Tartigny (14 miles south-west of Moreuil).

The *Seventh Army*, on the left of the *Eighteenth*, was to take part in this advance and move forward to a line on the Aisne, Fontenoy (15 miles south-east of Compiègne)—Compiègne.

Thus a great barrier facing south-west from Fontenoy to Airaines would be formed by the *Seventh*, *Eighteenth* and *Second Armies* to keep off the French, whilst the British were dealt with by the *Seventeenth* and *Sixth Armies* and the Belgians by the *Fourth*. How the gap between the right of the *Second Army* at Airaines and the left of the *Seventeenth* at Doullens, over twenty miles, was to be covered is not mentioned.

French authorities have suggested that Ludendorff intended to advance on Paris. No hint of such a plan is to be found in any German writer. General von Kuhl points out that even if the main effort had been directed against Amiens in order to separate the French and British, the intention of breaking up the British front would have had to be abandoned: there would not have been enough men for it. Far less, therefore, would there have been sufficient to allow of an advance on Paris, so long as Ludendorff adhered to his original object of routing the British, and this he steadfastly pursued throughout the various offensives which he conducted in 1918 until, in July, he finally lost the initiative to the Allies.

<sup>1</sup> Apparently the line Noyon—Moreuil (exclusive) was meant, but all except the right of the Army was already on this line.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE DOULENS CONFERENCE

26TH MARCH 1918

(Sketch 19)

AT the conference between M. Poincaré, M. Clemenceau, General Foch and Lord Milner at General Pétain's headquarters on the 25th (mentioned in Chapter XVII) it had been arranged to reassemble for a further meeting, at 11 A.M. on the 26th, at Dury (3 miles south of Amiens). This village had been prepared as British Advanced G.H.Q., but actually was occupied by Fifth Army Headquarters. Sir Douglas Haig was requested to be present at the Conference. When he was informed of the place and time, he pointed out that he had summoned his Army commanders, Generals Horne, Plumer and Byng, to a meeting at the Hôtel de Ville at Doullens at the hour named; he therefore suggested that the proposed conference might be held at midday at the same place. His suggestion was accepted.<sup>1</sup>

At the Army commanders' meeting at 11 A.M., at which and at the subsequent Allied Conference Major-General A. A. Montgomery acted for General Sir H. Rawlinson, the British Military Representative at Versailles, General Byng expressed himself as satisfied with the situation of the Third

<sup>1</sup> General Gough was not summoned to the Army commanders' meeting, as he was regarded as under the command of General Fayolle; but G.H.Q. knew the general situation of his troops through his own and the G.H.Q. liaison officers' reports. One of the liaison officers had telephoned at 2.10 A.M. on the 26th:—

"Fifth Army has been ordered to hold the approaches between Somme and Avre at all costs. XIX. Corps will continue to oppose enemy advance in accordance with orders already issued. The G.H.Q. line Moreuil [on the Avre]—Mézières—Marcelcave—Hamel—Bouzencourt (now under construction) will be held to the last, and there will be no retirement from this line. . . . [The troops detailed to defend it, Carey's Force, etc., were then enumerated]. In the event of XIX. Corps being forced to withdraw to this line, the troops of the XIX. Corps will retire through the line and will reorganize behind it under cover of the defences "with a view to assisting in the defence."

At 8.20 A.M. the Fifth Army reported to G.H.Q. the line held by the

Army. On the southern wing, he said, the enemy was very tired and no real fighting was taking place : friend and foe were alike dead beat and only staggering along : further north, the enemy was trying to press on, but the Third Army was holding its own. The Commander-in-Chief then made it clear that the present object must be to cling to the ground now held in order to gain time for the French to arrive and render help : the covering of Amiens was of vital importance for the success of the cause : if the enemy pressed forward, the line of the Third Army must not be so extended by giving ground as to run the risk of its breaking. To prevent this from happening he ordered General Horne (First Army) to pull three Canadian divisions out of the line and place them at some central point behind the Third Army.

Whilst this meeting was taking place, and even before the hour of its assembly, the members of the Allied Conference, M. Poincaré, M. Clemenceau, M. Loucheur (Minister of Armaments), General Foch, General Pétain, Lord Milner and General Sir Henry Wilson began to arrive, some of them, including the French President, who was received by the local politicians, having been warned of the change of place only, and not of the change of hour.

In the course of conversation, General Pétain made it clear to M. Clemenceau, who instantly repeated the statement to the President of the Republic, that he had given orders for the retirement of the French Army southwards, and away from the British : further he quite expected the total defeat of the British in the open field, followed by that of the French Army. M. Clemenceau made the very proper comment that a general should not speak, should not even think in that way, and reported the remarks to the President. General Foch was able to persuade MM. Poincaré and Clemenceau that affairs were not so desperate. The only result of the French Commander-in-Chief's pessimistic outburst was to dispel any thought of subordinating Sir Douglas Haig to him—a prospect which had filled G.H.Q. with apprehension.<sup>1</sup>

XIX. Corps, and added, "enemy has not displayed any unusual activity during the night".

At 9.45 A.M., in a further report, the line of the French front and XVIII. Corps up to the right of the XIX. Corps was given, with the addition, "our line commencing to withdraw to Rouvroy—Proyart—Froissy" (the XIX. Corps position at the close of the day).

<sup>1</sup> The following account appears in Poincaré, x. p. 80 :—

"Clemenceau . . . s' interrompt toutefois pour me confier avec tristesse que le général Pétain envisage le repli de l'armée française vers le

At the conclusion of the Army Commanders' meeting and before the Conference took place, Lord Milner, accompanied by General Wilson, had a ten-minute conversation with the British generals. He ascertained that there was no intention of abandoning Amiens and falling back on the Channel ports, but that the Third Army could not extend its line further south than Bray on the Somme, in spite of all possible troops having been called down from the north: Gough's army being very weak and tired after six days' fighting, the line covering Amiens would be outflanked unless the French came up on the right, south of the Somme. Sir Douglas Haig further stated that the Germans had 193 divisions on the Western Front, of which 69 had already been identified as engaged, and there were still probably 25 in reserve. Lord Milner, not having seen the message which the Commander-in-Chief had addressed to the War Office on the 24th, in which he had suggested that Foch should be given Supreme Command, was delighted to find that Sir Douglas Haig had no objection to work under the French Chief of the General Staff.

At midday M. Poincaré took the chair of the Conference,<sup>1</sup> sitting at an oblong table with the nine other members:

“sud pendant que l’armée anglaise se retirerait vers le nord. Pétain avait, “ajoute Clemenceau, donné des ordres en conséquence. Foch me con-“firme le dernier renseignement et me communique l’ordre de retraite “donné par Pétain. Le président du Conseil [Clemenceau], ajoute Foch, “ne s’occupe des choses de guerre que depuis peu, il avait accepté le point “de vue de Pétain, mais je n’ai pas voulu en accepter la responsabilité. “J’ai remis à M. Clemenceau une note pour lui faire connaître mon opinion. “Le bon sens indique que lorsque l’ennemi veut ouvrir un trou, on ne “l’élargit pas. On le ferme, ou on essaie de le fermer. Nous n’avons qu’à “essayer et à vouloir ; le reste sera facile. On s’accroche au terrain, on le “défend pied à pied. Nous avons fait cela à Ypres, nous l’avons fait à “Verdun. Et Foch soutient encore ces choses avec la même énergie devant “Clemenceau, devant le sénateur [Rouzé, Mayor of Doullens, who was “present] et le député [Jovelet].

“Clemenceau, de plus en plus converti, me prend à part et me dit : “Pétain est agaçant à force de pessimisme. Imaginez-vous qu’il me dit “une chose que je ne voudrais confier à aucun autre qu’à vous. C’est “cette phrase : “Les Allemands battront les Anglais en rase campagne ; ““après quoi ils nous battront aussi”. Un général devrait-il parler et “même penser ainsi ? ”

<sup>1</sup> The most complete account of the Conference and events preceding it is given in the version of M. Loucheur, to whom M. Clemenceau presented as a souvenir the draft of the agreement written by him and corrected by M. Loucheur.

This account, with facsimiles of documents, was published in “L’Illustration” of 24th March 1928, and agrees with the British General Staff record drawn up from notes kept by Major-General A. A. Montgomery. Lord Milner’s “Memorandum to the Cabinet on his Visit to France,

M. Clemenceau, M. Loucheur, General Foch, General Pétain, Lord Milner, Field-Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, and Generals Sir H. Wilson, Sir H. Lawrence and A. A. Montgomery. He called upon the British Commander-in-Chief to explain the situation. This Sir Douglas Haig did very calmly Sketch and very simply. He related what had happened since 19. the 21st March, and how the Fifth and Third Armies had been forced back, declaring that he could do nothing more south of the Somme, but would hold on north of the river, he hoped successfully. It might be necessary, he thought, to rectify the line at Arras, withdrawing it from in front of to behind the town. What remained of the Fifth Army south of the Somme, he added, "I have put under "the orders of General Pétain". Thereupon the latter interrupted, "Alas, it no longer really exists, it is broken", going on to make disparaging remarks about General Gough's troops and to compare them to the Italians after Caporetto. This drew a heated reply from General Wilson. The remarks of the French Commander-in-Chief seemed to indicate that he was not accurately informed of the situation of at least the XVIII. and XIX. Corps. In default, however, of information from General Fayolle, who had not been summoned to Doullens, the Conference appear to have regarded the Fifth Army as defeated and scattered.

General Pétain was then asked to explain what measures he had taken :—

"The Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies stated "in a few words the very great efforts made since the 22nd "March. Twenty-four divisions from his reserve were en "route. Orders had been given to the effect that other "divisions should follow."<sup>1</sup>

"He had not hesitated to comb the Centre and Eastern "Front in order to meet the danger. Field-Marshal Haig "had mentioned that he had no reserves at all, and that "there were none available in England, or so few<sup>2</sup> . . . "It is evident, General Pétain added, that everything "possible must be done to defend Amiens.

<sup>1</sup> "including the Conference at Doullens March 26th 1918", written next day, was printed in "The New Statesman" of 23rd April 1921; it is not so complete.

<sup>2</sup> The above and following quotation are M. Loucheur's words. Lord Milner in his Memorandum points out that at the Conference at Compiègne on the previous day General Pétain had spoken only of 15 divisions, so that he had advanced somewhat in his views.

<sup>2</sup> These dots occur in M. Loucheur's account.

" At the mention of this name, Foch interjected : ' We must fight in front of Amiens, we must fight where we are now. As we have not been able to stop the Germans on the Somme, we must not now retire a single inch '.

" On this outburst Field-Marshal Haig was heard to say, " if General Foch will consent to give me his advice, I will gladly follow it ". All present felt the decisive moment had arrived."

M. Clemenceau took Lord Milner into a corner and then called to General Pétain. Lord Milner spoke to Sir Douglas Haig, and found him not only willing but glad to accept the control of General Foch.

M. Clemenceau then wrote out and proposed as the agreement :—

" General Foch is charged by the British and French Governments with the co-ordination of the action of the British and French Armies in front of Amiens. He will arrange to this effect with the two Generals-in-Chief, who are invited to furnish him with the necessary information."

Sir Douglas Haig immediately pointed out the difficulty of such a task unless General Foch had full authority over all the operations " on the Western Front ". To this, General Pétain at once agreed, and in revising the draft first the words " front occidental " and then " front ouest " were substituted for " devant Amiens ", and then " Armées Alliées " for " Armées anglaises et françaises ".

M. Clemenceau and Lord Milner signed the agreement, and the President of the Republic said, " je crois, messieurs " que nous avons bien travaillé pour la victoire ". Sir Douglas Haig audibly expressed his relief that in future he would have to deal with a man and not with a committee. Later Lord Milner asked Sir Herbert Lawrence how he could help the generals, to which the C.G.S. replied : " by leaving them alone ". This advice Lord Milner, who a month later became the Secretary of State for War, took to heart and unreservedly followed for the rest of the war.

The situation as General Foch supposed it to be when he took over the command is shown on a sketch map in his " Memoirs." <sup>1</sup> Besides the French troops already in line (Pellé's and Robillot's Corps of Humbert's Third Army), only the following reinforcements are shown : the 5th Cavalry Division arriving behind the French Third

<sup>1</sup> Foch, ii. opposite p. 27.

Army; the 56th Division detraining at Breteuil, west of Montdidier, covered by an advanced guard; the 4th Cavalry Division detraining at Conty (11 miles S.S.W of Amiens), covered by a brigade; the 133rd Division, just east of Dury.<sup>1</sup> In the margin are shown the 16th Division and 3rd Cavalry Division, "in the course of transport" or whose transport had been decided on". Thus there was immediately available little to support the already yielding front of the French Third Army.

General Foch was no sooner invested with his new powers and informed of the situation of the British Armies than he instructed General Pétain to accelerate the movement of his reserves to the north of the Oise. Then, deeply conscious of the precious time already wasted in conference and debate, he set off to visit the Army commanders of General Fayolle's Group. He first went to the Fifth Army headquarters at Dury, where he arrived about 4 P.M. There he asked a number of questions of General Gough, reiterating that there must be no more retirement, and that the line must be held at all costs.<sup>2</sup> He offered no advice as to how this had best be done, and did not mention reinforcements. Subsequently, General Gough was informed that his right-hand corps, the XVIII., would be relieved as soon as possible by French troops and put at his disposal to serve as first reserve to his Fifth Army. Later on, in the evening, General Gough spoke on the telephone to the Chief of the General Staff and informed him that the enemy attacks were evidently weakening, and that the Germans were getting worn out and were very tired: if two or three fresh divisions could be sent to him, the enemy in front might, he thought, be pushed back to the Somme. General Lawrence replied that it was good to hear that there was plenty of fight still left in the men, but no reinforcements could for the moment be sent.

General Foch had met General Barthélémy, General Fayolle's Chief of the Staff, at Dury, and to him he gave written instructions, which were also communicated to General Pétain by a liaison officer. They ran:

"In order to assure the protection of Amiens at any cost, General Fayolle is invited to:—

<sup>1</sup> According to F.O.A. Order of Battle Volume, under 133rd Division, only an advanced guard (Groupement Mesple) had arrived. The detrainment of the division covered 25th March-4th April.

<sup>2</sup> A full account of this curious meeting is given in Gough, pp. 305-9.

- " 1. Maintain at all costs the position actually held by " the British Fifth Army south of the Somme from La " Neuville les Bray [on the south side of the Somme " opposite Bray] to Rovroy and Guerbigny [6 miles " west of Roye].
- " 2. Support, and then relieve, the Fifth Army south of " the Somme as soon as possible, without in so doing " compromising the region south of Roye, and defending " the ground foot by foot to ensure this."

From Dury, since time pressed, General Foch telephoned his instructions to General Debenev. The First Army was to relieve the British XVIII. Corps and maintain its position on the front on which its troops were engaged that evening, gaining touch with the British towards Rovroy. At 7 P.M., when he arrived at General Debenev's headquarters at Maignelay (8 miles S.S.W. of Montdidier) he confirmed these instructions verbally. He postponed his visits to General Humbert, at whose headquarters General Fayolle was to meet him and to General Byng until next day ; he then returned to Paris.

According to his diary, the guiding principles which he had in mind in issuing directives were :—

1. Before everything else, the French and British troops, remaining closely in touch, must cover Amiens.
2. To this end, the troops already engaged must at all costs hold their ground. Under their protection, the French troops sent to reinforce would complete their detrainment. They would be employed : first to consolidate the Fifth Army and afterwards to constitute a mass of manœuvre under conditions to be settled later.

That evening General Pétain cancelled his instructions of the 24th, and ordered General Fayolle to cover Amiens and maintain liaison with the forces of Sir Douglas Haig. He further arranged for the transport to General Fayolle of ten more divisions and four regiments of heavy artillery.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the dangerous situation, mainly brought about, first, by the British Government consenting to the extension of the British front without providing the reinforcements necessary for the purpose, and, secondly, by General Pétain contemplating the separation of the French from the British Army, was in a fair way to be remedied.

<sup>1</sup> Foch, ii. p. 28.

## SKELETON ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE FIFTH AND THIRD ARMIES

### FIFTH ARMY

(General Sir Hubert Gough)

III. CORPS (Lieut.-General Sir R. H. K. Butler) :

58th (2/1st London) Division (Major-General A. B. E. Cator) :  
173, 174, 175 Brigades.

18th (Eastern) Division (Major-General R. P. Lee) :  
53, 54, 55 Brigades.

14th (Light) Division (Major-General Sir V. A. Couper ; *from 22nd March*, Major-General W. H. Greenly) :  
41, 42, 43 Brigades.

XVIII. CORPS (Lieut.-General Sir I. Maxse) :

36th (Ulster) Division (Major-General O. S. W. Nugent) :  
107, 108, 109 Brigades.

30th Division (Major-General W. de L. Williams) :  
21, 89, 90 Brigades.

61st (2nd South Midland) Division (Major-General C. J. Mackenzie) :  
182, 183, 184 Brigades.

*From 1 p.m. 21st March :*

20th (Light) Division (Major-General W. Douglas Smith) :  
59, 60, 61 Brigades.

XIX. CORPS (Lieut.-General Sir H. E. Watts) :

24th Division (Major-General A. C. Daly) :  
17, 72, 73 Brigades.

66th (2nd East Lancashire) Division (Major-General N. Malcolm) :  
197, 198, 199 Brigades.

*From 3.20 p.m. 21st March :*

50th (Northumbrian) Division (Br.-General A. U. Stockley ; *from 24th March*, Major-General H. C. Jackson) :  
149, 150, 151 Brigades.

*From 1 p.m. 22nd March :*

8th Division (Major-General W. C. G. Heneker) :  
28, 24, 25 Brigades.

*See also VII. Corps.*

## ORDER OF BATTLE

VII. CORPS (Lieut.-General Sir W. N. Congreve) transferred to *Third Army* 4 a.m. 25th March :

16th (Irish) Division (Major-General Sir C. P. A. Hull) transferred to *XIX. Corps* 4 a.m. 25th March :

47, 48, 49 Brigades.

21st Division (Major-General D. G. M. Campbell) :

62, 64, 110 Brigades.

9th (Scottish) Division (Br.-General H. H. Tudor; from 24th March, Major-General C. A. Blacklock) :

26, 27, South African Brigades.

39th Division (Br.-General M. L. Hornby; from 23rd March, Major-General E. Feetham) transferred to *XIX. Corps* 4 a.m. 25th March :

116, 117, 118 Brigades.

*From 6.30 p.m. 23rd March :*

35th Division (Major-General G. McK. Franks) :

104, 105, 106 Brigades.

*From noon 25th March, but at 7.40 p.m. transferred to V. Corps :*

12th (Eastern) Division (Major-General A. B. Scott) :

35, 36, 37 Brigades.

## THIRD ARMY

(General Hon. Sir Julian H. G. Byng)

V. CORPS (Lieut.-General Sir E. A. Fanshawe) :

47th (2nd London) Division (Major-General Sir G. F. Gorringe) :

140, 141, 142 Brigades.

63rd (Royal Naval) Division (Major-General C. E. Lawrie) :

188, 189, 190 Brigades.

17th (Northern) Division (Major-General P. R. Robertson) :

50, 51, 52 Brigades.

2nd Division (Major-General C. E. Pereira) :

5, 6, 99 Brigades.

19th (Western) Division (Major-General G. D. Jeffreys) transferred to *IV. Corps* 12.55 p.m. 21st March :

56, 57, 58 Brigades.

*From 7.40 p.m. 25th March :*

12th (Eastern) Division (Major-General A. B. Scott) :

35, 36, 37 Brigades.

IV. CORPS (Lieut.-General Sir G. M. Harper) :

51st (Highland) Division (Major-General G. T. C. Carter-Campbell) :

152, 153, 154 Brigades.

6th Division (Major-General T. O. Marden) :

16, 18, 71 Brigades.

25th Division (Major-General Sir E. G. T. Bainbridge) :

7, 74, 75 Brigades.

*From 12.55 p.m. 21st March :*

19th (Western) Division (Major-General G. D. Jeffreys) :

56, 57, 58 Brigades.

*From afternoon 22nd March :*

41st Division (Major-General Sir S. T. B. Lawford) :

122, 123, 124 Brigades.

*From 10.20 a.m. 24th March :*

42nd (1st East Lancashire) Division (Major-General A. Solly-Flood) :  
125, 126, 127 Brigades.

*From early morning 25th March :*

62nd (2nd West Riding) Division (Major-General W. P. Braithwaite) :  
185, 186, 187 Brigades.

*From night 25th/26th March :*

New Zealand Division (Major-General Sir A. H. Russell) :  
1 N.Z., 2 N.Z., N.Z.R. Brigades.

4th Australian Division (Major-General E. G. Sinclair-MacLagan) :  
4 Aus., 12 Aus., 13 Aus. Brigades.

#### VI. CORPS (Lieut.-General Sir J. A. L. Haldane) :

59th (2nd North Midland) Division (Major-General C. F. Romer) :  
176, 177, 178 Brigades.

34th Division (Major-General C. L. Nicholson) :  
101, 102, 103 Brigades.

3rd Division (Major-General C. J. Deverell) :  
8, 9, 76 Brigades.

*From noon 21st March :*

40th Division (Major-General J. Ponsonby) :  
119, 120, 121 Brigades.

*By 7 p.m. 22nd March :*

Guards Division (Major-General G. P. T. Feilding) *from XVII. Corps* :

1 Gds., 2 Gds., 3 Gds. Brigades.

*From evening 22nd March :*

81st Division (Major-General R. J. Bridgford) :  
4 Gds., 92, 93 Brigades.

#### XVII. CORPS (Lieut.-General Sir Charles Ferguson, Bt.) :

15th (Scottish) Division (Br.-General W. H. L. Allgood; *from 24th March*, Major-General H. L. Reed) :  
44, 45, 46 Brigades.

4th Division (Major-General T. G. Matheson) :  
10, 11, 12 Brigades.

Guards Division (*See VI. Corps*).

#### CAVALRY CORPS (Lieut.-General Sir C. T. McM. Kavanagh) :

1st Cavalry Division (Major-General R. L. Mullens) :  
1 Cav., 2 Cav., 9 Cav. Brigades.

2nd Cavalry Division (Major-General W. H. Greenly; *from 22nd March*, Br.-General T. T. Pitman, *see 14th Division*) :  
3 Cav., 4 Cav., 5 Cav. Brigades.

3rd Cavalry Division (Br.-General A. E. W. Harman) :  
6 Cav., 7 Cav., Canadian Cav. Brigades.



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## ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE FRENCH TROOPS WHICH CAME TO THE ASSISTANCE OF THE FIFTH ARMY UP TO THE 26TH MARCH.

GROUP OF ARMIES OF RESERVE (General Fayolle)

THIRD ARMY (General Humbert) :

V. Corps (General Pellé) :

125th Division	<i>22nd March.</i>
1st Dismounted Cavalry Division	<i>23rd</i> "
9th Division	<i>23rd</i> "
10th    "	<i>23rd</i> "
55th    "	<i>24th</i> "
1st    "	<i>25th</i> "
35th    "	<i>25th</i> "
53rd    " (part)	<i>26th</i> "
77th    " (part)	<i>26th</i> "

II. Cavalry Corps<sup>1</sup> (General Robillot) :

22nd Division	<i>24th</i> "
62nd    ,,	<i>24th</i> "

FIRST ARMY (General Debeney) :

56th Division	<i>25th</i> "
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II. CAVALRY CORPS<sup>2</sup> :

1st Cavalry Division	<i>26th March, 11 a.m. to General Robillot's corps.</i>
5th    ,,    ,,	<i>26th March, 9 a.m. to Third Army reserve.</i>
6th    ,,    ,,	<i>27th March, to G.A.R. Reserve.</i>

<sup>1</sup> II. Cavalry Corps Staff.

<sup>2</sup> The corps was not formed as projected, and its divisions were used separately.

NOTE

THE GERMAN ORDER OF BATTLE IS SHOWN UPON  
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